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"FOR SHAME! TO SEEK TO RUN DOWN A BLIND AND CRIPPLED MAN!
BACK! YOU HOUNDS, OR DIE!"

OR,

A SON'S VENGEANCE.

BY E. L. WHEELER,
AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK," "ROSEBUD
BOB," "YREKA JIM," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. "DRAPPED IN."

BUCKSHOT CAMP, Arizona.

It existed a few years ago, but, since then, has been the victim of a conflagration that consumed nearly every shanty.

Situated on the mountain-side, the camp never made pretensions to becoming a city; its site was against its growing to any great proportions, and besides, its mineral product was not sufficient to cause a "boom."

There was but one quartz mine, known as the Big Bear, and this only gave employment to the forty odd miners of the camp.

Of course there were other inhabitants—gamblers, saloon-keepers, toughs and the other inevitable *dramatis personae*, peculiar to all mountain mining-towns, so that, all told, the population was nigh about a hundred souls.

The most important personage in the camp was George Sheldon, owner of the quartz mine, and literally "boss of the burg." He was the moneyed power, and never lost any opportunity to impress the fact upon those with whom he came in contact.

He was unmarried, at least so far as the denizens of Buckshot were apprised;—a tall, powerfully-built man, with a cold, stern face, keen gray eyes, and iron-gray hair and side-whiskers.

He claimed to be but thirty-eight years of age, but many doubted his veracity in this matter, as he looked to be every bit of fifty.

If he had any friends in the camp it was because of his money, not for his good qualities of head and heart.

One of the resorts of the camp was the Jackpot Saloon, kept by a hard-visaged old sport, known by the *sobriquet* of "Old Jackpot."

The saloon was the largest cabin in the place, and contained a bar-room and gaming-room, combined, besides a couple of living apartments.

At this place the miners were wont to assemble after their hard day's work, and either leave their earnings at the bar for "bug-juice, or to risk them at the gaming-tables. And as a matter of course, they lost many times oftener than they won. "Sharps" hanging about, ever stood ready to fleece them at a moment's notice. The most expert gambler of the lot, was Jack Turner, or Rowdy Jack, as he was most commonly known—a dark, sinister fellow of twenty-eight or thirty, with eyes, hair and mustache as black as jet.

He always dressed with sportish elegance, yet with scrupulous care, and his immaculate shirt-front blazed with diamonds.

He was known and generally feared as a desperate man. He had already shot and killed three men, since his advent in Buckshot, and often made his boast of having started the first cemetery.

In gambling he seldom lost, and when he did, it was invariably to draw his victim on.

One warm summer's night, when the soaring full moon threw a mellow radiance upon the rugged camp, the Jackpot drew not its usual throng of devotees of chance. The night without was so beautiful few people cared to remain indoors.

Consequently the gamblers sat idly at their tables. An ugly scowl rested on Rowdy Jack's face as, at his table, he puffed his cigar. He was ever in a disagreeable mood when there were no victims to fleece, and would then frequently give way to blasphemy.

But one man in the camp, outside of George Sheldon, at such times dared speak to the young desperado, for fear of getting shot, and that was Old Jackpot—a hook-nosed, ferret-eyed scoundrel, who never was so happy as when the money flowed into his coffers.

Jackpot had a lovely daughter of seventeen, who was fairly worshiped by every man in the camp, and especially by Rowdy Jack—hence it was that the gambler and the saloon-keeper never quarreled.

George Sheldon had also set his heart on winning the fair Adele; but of that more anon.

Rowdy Jack sat at his table to-night, inwardly cursing the luck that did not send him a "customer," when there entered the saloon a character most strange to see in that far-away camp.

Curious people often dropped into Buckshot Camp, but this man literally "took the bun!"

He was no more nor less than a hand-organ grinder—a bent and decrepit old fellow, who walked with a staff, and whose closed eyes suggested that he was blind.

His attire was ragged; his face was covered with a straggling gray beard.

Slung to his back by a strap was a hand-organ, and perched upon the organ was a monkey, dressed up in a dirty red coat and a fez cap.

Here was the most refreshing novelty that had ever struck Buckshot, and that it was appreciated was evidenced by a number of miners crowding into the saloon after the beggar.

Rowdy Jack's eyes gleamed wickedly. He was one of those wretches—for you can't call them men—who take a sort of insane delight in torturing anything weaker and more helpless than themselves; and the moment he set eyes

upon the organ-grinder he made up his mind to have some sport.

Rising from his table he approached the organ tramp and slapped him on the shoulder.

"Hello, old man! Who are you, and what d'ye want here? Speak up, before I blow the top of your head off!"

"Please, sir, do not ill-treat a poor old blind man!" was the tremulous reply. "I have traveled long and far, and am very weak. I have no money to buy food with. Will you let me play you some music for a few pennies? Anything you can do to assist a poor blind man you will be rewarded for in heaven!"

"Bah! get out! I don't expect to winter thar. My name's Rowdy Jack, and I'm booked for the other place, where coal-stoves ar' hot all the time. What's your name, you old ape?"

"Eh?"

"What's your name, I say?"

"Alvin Green, good sir."

"Ha! ha! ha! Alvin Green, eh? Well, see here, you must be mighty green ter think ye can play that screechin' hand-organ 'round this burg."

"It's a very good organ, sir."

"Don't care a continental cuss for that! You can't play the thing in *this* camp. So just sling it down on the floor, so I can kick the stuffin' out of it!"

"Oh! no! no! good sir! It is the only means I have of earning a few pennies toward my support. I beg of you, sir, do not harm my organ."

"Get out, you Italian mongrel! You do as I tell you, or off goes the top of yer cabeza!"

"I am no Italian, sir. I'm an American, and a poor, almost sightless man."

Just then, Old Jackpot stepped from behind the bar.

"I say, Mr. Jack," he said, "it wouldn't hardly be fair for to take the man's organ from him without giving 'm some show for his white?"

Rowdy Jack scowled.

"Why not?—how d'ye mean?" he demanded.

"I mean gamble for it—toss dice to see whether the man keeps the organ or you give him fifty dollars. That will be capital fun, you know."

Rowdy Jack uttered a growl, but assented:

"All right, it's a go. If the old cuss wins he keeps his organ, and gets the fifty dollars. If he loses, he keeps his organ, but has only an hour to get out o' the camp. D'ye hear, old rag-bag?"

"Yes, good sir, I understand. But I shall have to trust to your honesty."

"Of course ye will. D'ye s'pose we'd cheat ye, ye infernal old tramp?"

"I'll see that you *ain't* cheated, old man!" cried a ringing voice—a voice that was so strange to the crowd that they wheeled about, simultaneously.

They beheld, standing near at hand, a girl of beautiful face and figure—a girl with midnight eyes and flowing dark-brown hair—a girl attired in stylish, elegant-fitting gray suit of male attire, including patent-leather shoes, and a jaunty white slouch sombrero. She stood there, smiling, while she twirled a light cane in her right hand.

"Who the devil are you?" Rowdy Jack demanded, in great surprise.

"Who am I?" was the pert reply. "Well, if you want to know, I'm an angel without wings—a regular la-lah, you bet! I hail from Texas-way, an' down there I'm known as Santa Fe Sal, the Slasher. Are you happy to meet me?"

CHAPTER II.

THE MONKEY THE MASTER.

THE girl's words and manner rather nettled Rowdy Jack, but concluding it might not prove a disadvantage to play off graciously he bowed low, and said:

"It affords me the greatest pleasure to know you, dear lady, and I hope our acquaintance may be extended far into the future."

"You'd better wait till you know me first, before you go to making wishes too fast, captain," was the retort. "Go ahead wi' your dice-throwin'. I'm going to see that the organ-grinder has a fair shake."

"You are?"

"You bet I am!"

"D'ye mean to insinuate that we would rob the man?" Rowdy Jack demanded, bristling up.

"I wouldn't shake dice with *any* man with my eyes shut," was the cool answer.

"I'm cussed if I ain't a mind to slap your mouth for you, Miss Sassytongue!"

"You might get your nose pulled, if you try it on!" was the undaunted answer. "There's a school down in Santa Fe just fer learnin' the nose-pullin' biz, and I'm a graduate."

A ripple of laughter from the crowd caused Rowdy Jack to utter a low, muttered oath.

"I'll see about that, as soon as I get through with this beggar; mind ye that!" he snorted.

He then turned to Alvin Green.

"Come up here to the bar, old rag-bag, if you're going to throw dice with me. I'll show you, you've got into ther wrong town. Set out the box, bartender!"

Old Alvin felt his way to the bar, and the box was placed in his hand.

"Now cup your dice," ordered Rowdy Jack. "Three throws, ace counts seven—highest man wins."

"I fear I don't know much about games," Alvin said, in a tremulous tone. "I never gambled in my life."

"That don't make any difference. Go ahead and throw."

The order was obeyed.

Alvin threw three times, scoring only sixteen.

"No good," Rowdy Jack declared, contemptuously. "I can beat that first time."

"Cup your dice," ordered Santa Fe Sal, who was standing near, "and keep your hand on the bottom end of the box. No monkey-business when Santa Fe Sal, the Slasher, is around!"

"Curse you!" the gambler gritted, and then cupped his dice.

He threw, and scored two aces and a five—nineteen.

"Hurrah! I'm the winner!" he cried. "The organ and monkey is mine. Take off the organ, old rag-bag, an' heer me play a tune on the cussed thing."

"No! no! no! no!" Alvin cried. "You wasn't to have my organ even if you won. You was to let me have it and leave the town."

"Git out, you fool! That's a likely story. The bet was, if you won you was to have my fifty dollars; while if I won, I was to have your organ and monkey. Ain't that right, fellers?"

And the desperado whipped a pair of revolvers from his coat-pocket, and glared around at those present, as much as to say:

"I'll dare any man to disagree with me!"

And that was what he meant.

Woe be to the man who refused to say "no."

"That was the bet!" agreed Old Jackpot, keeping an eye on the weapons, of which he had a mortal terror.

"That was the bet, an' the monkey and organ is Rowdy Jack's!" chorused the crowd.

"Oh! great Father of Mercy, it is *not* true!" cried the beggar, bursting into tears. "You are trying to rob me! you are trying to rob me! Pipo! Pipo! don't let them touch my organ!"

This was evidently addressed to the monkey, just as Rowdy Jack seized Alvin roughly by the shoulder.

The monkey evidently understood its master's order, for, with a vicious squeal, it leaped on top of the gambler's head, and began to claw and bite with all its might.

Rowdy Jack yelled with pain and affright, as he tried to tear the monkey from his head, while the crowd looked on, in open-mouthed amazement.

Santa Fe Sal saw that here was a chance, and seizing Alvin by the arm, she hurried him out of the saloon.

"Now make off as fast as you can—get out of sight, at all events. I'll not let Rowdy Jack follow you."

"But Pipo! Pipo!"

"Never mind him; away with you, if you wish to save your bacon!"

Alvin did, and dodged around the corner of the saloon with an alacrity he had not previously shown.

Santa Fe Sal smiled, faintly, and turned to re-enter the Jackpot, at the same time drawing a pair of revolvers, and cocking them.

As she did so Pipo came flying from the saloon, and disappeared around the corner, in pursuit of his master.

Santa Fe Sal then re-entered the den.

Rowdy Jack stood in the center of the room, mopping the blood from his face, and swearing and groaning, alternately.

He was indeed a fearful spectacle.

His face and head were clawed and bitten in a shocking manner, and his left eye had been nearly torn from its socket.

Verily, Pipo had got in his work with a vengeance.

The gambler really was in excruciating agony, and raved and danced like a madman.

"Ten thousand devils! Chase the old bellion! Ten hundred dollars to the ones that take him, dead or alive! After him, I say! Why do you stand there, like a pack of gaping idiots, when you see that I am nearly murdered?"

Perhaps a dozen men made a rush toward the

door, only to find the doorway blocked by Santa Fe Sal, whose revolvers were leveled straight at them.

"Back!" she cried, in unmistakable tones of warning. "Back, you hounds, or I'll let daylight through every one of ye! For shame! to seek to run down a blind and crippled man! Back! you hounds, or die!"

The men halted, for there was no mistaking the girl's purpose to shoot.

"Let a man of you dare to draw a weapon, and he's a dead man!" Sal continued, undauntedly. "I never fail when I pull trigger! Cowards! to hound down a man who cannot see. You deserve to be shot, every one of you!"

The men exchanged glances, as they shrunk back.

Their hesitation all the more enraged Rowdy Jack, and he fairly shrieked:

"Go on! go on! curses on you! I'll pay ye as much to capture the girl as the beggar!"

Here was an extra incentive.

A thousand dollars was not to be made every day.

And Rowdy Jack was as good as a bank, so far as pay was concerned.

"Hurrah! boys, come on!" one of the gang cried, making the initiatory move forward. But, it was to his death, for the right revolver of Santa Fe Sal spoke sharply, and a bullet landed in the rash man's brain.

With an unearthly yell he fell in the path of his comrades, and they again recoiled in real terror.

"That man earned his fate!" Santa Fe Sal cried, "and if any of the rest of you want a funeral just notify me. I'll leave you, now, and you can hunt old Alvin Green, if you are so inclined, but don't come fooling around me, or down goes your shanty, for I'm a slasher who always gets the drop!"

And keeping them covered with her revolvers, she backed out of the saloon and disappeared.

The next instant, the miners rushed out after her, with vengeful cries, but she was gone.

There were plenty of trees in the camp, and it was therefore an easy matter for her to quickly conceal herself.

Then too, no street having been laid out, the houses were built without any conformity to line, so that one could dodge from one to the other without being detected.

A general and exciting search was made for the daring girl, in which nearly all the citizens joined.

But all to no use.

Had the earth opened and swallowed her, Santa Fe Sal could not more effectually have vanished.

At last, when it was nearly midnight, the miners were forced to give in, beaten and discomfited.

The man killed had been a thrifty miner—his name was John Hall—and the excited citizens all united in swearing vengeance on Santa Fe Sal, and resolutions were ordered drafted, offering a reward of sufficient amount to secure her immediate capture.

Neither had the search of the camp revealed the whereabouts of old Alvin Green, the organ-grinder.

What had become of him?

And what had become of Santa Fe Sal?

We must leave that for later chapters to reveal, while we take up another thread of our story.

For, dear reader, not to be behind the times, Buckshot Camp boasted of a mystery.

CHAPTER III.

THE MASKED STRANGER.

SOME two months prior to the events of this eventful night, a little stranger made its appearance in the mining-camp of Buckshot—a pretty, chubby, flaxen-haired boy, about two years and six months of age.

He was found one morning, by an early-rising miner named Tyndale—found lying under a great oak tree, fast asleep.

A remarkably pretty child, its features indicated that it had been born of refined parents, as did its tasty clothing.

The clothing, however, was besmeared with blood-stains, that appeared to be several days if not weeks old.

Here was a prime mystery, that created an unprecedented furor in Buckshot Camp.

How came the child where it was found?

Whose child was it?

What did the blood-stains mean?

Murder?

It would seem so.

Tyndale took the child home to his wife, and, soon after, all Buckshot knew of the "find," and

everybody flocked to get a glimpse at the new-comer.

The little fellow seemed frightened at first, and inclined to cry, but gradually he brightened up, and appeared to be happy.

He could speak a few words, but all questioning failed to elicit whether he had been taken from mother and father, or not. He did not seem to know the meaning of any of the usual parental pet names, nor to know his own name.

Nor was there a clew as to his identity, all of which increased a mystery, which seemingly was destined to remain unsolved.

A search of the surrounding country was made, but all to no purpose. No trace of anything that would throw light on the matter, was to be found.

The nearest settlement or habitation to Buckshot Camp, was a good two days' ride distant.

The little stranger's description was taken there, but nothing could be learned, in regard to the child.

Everybody in Buckshot took a liking to the little stranger, and everybody prophesied that its coming would bring luck to the camp.

It would seem that it did, for the Big Bear mine soon after began to pan out better.

Among others who appeared to take a decided fancy to the child was George Sheldon. Stern man of the world though he was, the sight of the little fellow seemed to melt his cold, unloving heart, and he offered to undertake its support and education.

So it was placed in charge of a widow of the camp, whose husband had been killed in the Big Bear mine, by a premature explosion, and George Sheldon thereafter contributed liberally to Hannah Hayes, and the child, which was named Bertie Bright, on account of its sunny appearance.

Well, Bertie grew and thrived under Hannah Hayes's care, and became the pet of every one. He grew to talk more plainly, but the secret of his past still remained a dead letter.

George Sheldon was a wealthy man, and he spared neither money nor pains that the widow and her charge should have every comfort and luxury they could desire.

Once a rumor got afloat that it was not altogether improbable the mine-owner and the widow would eventually marry, but those who knew of the former's infatuation for Old Jackpot's daughter, Adele, smiled at the idea.

Hannah Hayes treated little Bertie with all a mother's care, and appeared to be entirely wrapped up in him, never having had a chick nor child of her own.

She had often expressed a fear that some one would yet come along, and lay claim to her pet, but no one had come, and the chances increased daily that Bertie Bright's past would never be revealed.

On the night on which the jamboree had occurred at the Jackpot Saloon, Hannah and Bertie were up quite late, for the child was playful and happy, and did not want to go to bed.

At last, however, his little eyes grew heavy, and Hannah tucked him away in his little bed, and he was soon sound asleep—so pretty and innocent, these slumbering babes, that it must be a heart of stone that wouldn't melt to gaze upon them.

Hannah then closed the bedroom door, and returned to the living apartment of the cabin, to attend to a few little duties ere she herself retired.

She was thus busily engaged, when there came a rap on the door—plainly a masculine rap it was, too.

"That must be Mr. Sheldon," she said, half-aloud. "I wonder what he can want, at this hour?"

She hastened to the door, unbarred it, and flung it wide open, naturally expecting to see the mine-owner, for she seldom had any other evening visitor, except when now and then, a miner's wife would drop in, for a minute.

As she opened the door, a stranger stepped quickly within the cabin—a tall man, wearing a full mask, and enveloped in a long cloak.

As he did so, he pushed Hannah away from the door, and closed and barred it.

"Silence!" he ordered, sternly. "Utter a cry, and I'll blow your brains out! Sit down, yonder, and calm yourself, for I mean you no harm."

"Oh! sir, who are you, and whatever brings you here?"

"Do as I bid you, madam!" sternly.

White and trembling, Hannah obeyed, her heart seeming to rise up, and choke her.

With his back against the door, the stranger drew a revolver from beneath his cloak, and toyed with it in a significant manner.

"It matters not who I am, madam," he answered. "I came here, on a matter of business."

"Business, sir—what business can you have with me?"

"I came to ask some questions. If you answer them correctly, all will be well for you. If not, all will not be well!"

"Oh! I will answer them, sir, if I can!"

"Quite sensible of you!"

He was silent a moment, in thought.

Then, he went on:

"About two months ago, a child was found in this camp, was there not?"

"Yes, sir."

"A boy, or girl?"

"A little boy, sir."

"About how old?"

"Two and a half, sir."

"Quite pretty?"

"Very."

"What kind of hair and eyes?"

"Quite light."

"Who found the child?"

"Mr. Tyndale."

"How was the child dressed?"

"In an embroidered white dress."

"Could the child talk?"

"Only a few words, sir."

"Was there nothing on the child by which it could be identified?"

"Nothing, sir."

"You have the child in keeping?"

Hannah hesitated.

"Why do you want to know?" she asked, anxiously.

The stranger uttered a dry cough.

"I'm asking the questions—you answer them," he said, gruffly.

"I have the child," Hannah acknowledged, keeping an eye on the revolver.

"Did you adopt the child?"

"No, sir; I am keeping it."

"On your own means?"

"No, sir."

"Who supplies the means, then?"

"A kind gentleman, who took a liking to the little one, sir."

"His name?"

"George Sheldon, sir."

"Ahem! What has the child been named?"

"We named him Bertie Bright, sir, because he is so bright and pretty."

"Who selected the name?"

"Mr. Sheldon."

"He is very much attached to the child?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was the child in any way injured when found?"

"No, sir. His clothes were covered with blood, but he was uninjured."

"Is Mr. Sheldon a married man?"

"No, sir."

"Ever been married?"

"I don't know."

"Any scars or birth-marks on the child's body?"

"No, sir."

"I wish to see the child."

"Oh! sir, he is asleep."

"That don't matter. I want to see him, and will see him."

"Oh! sir, you are not going to take him away from me?" Hannah cried, in distress. "Oh! please don't, for I love him so dearly."

"I shall not disturb the child. Lead on."

Hannah took the light, and they entered the adjoining room, where Bertie was sleeping.

The masked stranger knelt beside the cradle, and gazed for several minutes upon the angelic face.

Once or twice Hannah fancied she saw a quiver pass over his stalwart frame; but if this were so, it was the only emotion he betrayed.

At last he arose, and they left the room, where he once more took up his position against the door.

"I suppose you treat the child kindly?" he said, dryly.

"Oh! yes, sir, it could not get any better treatment than I give it; I never have had any children of my own, sir, and I love this little stranger as I would one of my own."

"Your husband is not living, I take it."

"No, sir. My husband was killed in the mine."

"How long ago?"

"Nearly a year, sir."

"Then, I suppose you will be getting married again soon."

"Oh! my, no! What makes you ask that? Whom would I marry?"

"Sheldon!"

"Indeed, no—I shall never marry Mr.

Sheldon; he has intentions in another direction."

"Ah! how is that?"

"It is talked that he is after Miss Adele Jackpot."

"Who?"

"Miss Adele Jackpot."

"Jackpot?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's a hot old name!"

And the visitor gave a perceptible sneer of disgust.

"I must be going!" he said. "I am deeply obliged to you for the information granted, madam, and am glad to see the child in such good hands. As long as you remain single he shall not be disturbed."

"Is the child yours, sir?"

"No. And, now, before I go, I want you to swear before Almighty God that you will never mention my visit here, to-night, to a living soul. Swear as I have directed!"

Hannah hesitated, then slowly obeyed.

"It is well!" the stranger said. "Your oath is registered. Break it, at your peril! One more question: Have you those blood-stained clothes?"

"Yes. I washed them, but the stains wouldn't come out."

"Good! Keep them! Under no circumstances, whatever, give them up to any one."

"Very well."

"Good-night!"

And without further ado the stranger left the cabin, and Hannah barred the door after him.

Out under the soaring moon, the stranger paused, and gazed steadily up into the blue vault of heaven.

Gazed thus, for several minutes, as if trying to penetrate beyond the skies.

Then two words escaped his lips, in a sort of agonized whisper—

"Florence! Florence!"

A moment more and he turned, and strode away among the gloomy pines, and became lost to view.

CHAPTER IV.

A VILLAINOUS THREAT.

MISS ADELE JACKPOT was counted the prettiest girl in Buckshot Camp, and was universally admired and respected. She was as charming in manners as she was pretty of face and figure, and so hard at contrast with her hook-nosed, old skinflint of a father, that many doubted if a drop of his blood flowed in her veins.

She was wont to rove about the camp of her own free will; was a good huntress, and often took a pilgrimage up the mountain-side, not getting back until a late hour.

And she seldom returned without a full game-bag.

On the day which opens our story, she had set out on one of these trips, armed with her gun and plenty of ammunition, and finding game scarce in the lower hills, had wandered far up the mountain-side—much further, indeed, than she had supposed, until she found night coming rapidly on.

So, having secured only a few birds, and a rabbit, she set out on her return to Buckshot.

But, although she hurried along briskly, night overtook her some miles from the camp, and the moon came up and soared high in the starry vault of the heavens, ere she sighted the lights of the camp below her.

She was yet a full mile distant from the camp, but now felt a comparative sense of safety, and, very much fatigued from her tramp, she seated herself for a moment on a boulder, to rest.

As she did so, a man stepped from a clump of bushes, and confronted her, at which she gave a little scream of alarm.

Then she saw who it was.

"Oh! is it you, Mr. Sheldon?"

"Yes, my fair Adele. I heard you were out on one of your jaunts up the mountain, and becoming alarmed lest ill had befallen you, I came to look you up," the mine-owner said, gallantly.

"That was very kind of you, I am sure," Adele said, "and I am sure papa will thank you for your interest in my behalf."

"Papa, bah!" Sheldon said, snapping his fingers contemptuously. "Do you know, Adele, I don't believe a drop of Old Jackpot's blood runs in your veins?"

"Oh! how can you say so, sir? I am sure he has been a very good parent to me."

"That be as it may, the contrast between you two is too strong for me to have any doubts about the matter. He's of the brute species;

you are an angel. Adele, do you know I had more than one purpose in coming to meet you to-night?"

"Mr. Sheldon?"

"Yes, Adele; I have something of the utmost importance to say to you—something, I fancy, that you already anticipate!"

"Oh! no, sir. I do not know—I—I—do not understand you, sir!"

"Then, dearest Adele, I will make it plainer for you, so that you will understand. You are aware that for some time past, I have been paying you my addresses, and have made you presents of several little trinkets, as tokens of my esteem. Have you not guessed why I, who am naturally so cold and distant, have warmed toward you? It was because I have grown to love you, and want you for my wife!"

"Oh! Mr. Sheldon!"

"Nay, do not feign to be surprised, for I know you have anticipated this proposal, and are in a measure prepared for it. You know I love you—passionately and devotedly; that no one else but your lovely self could ever find a place in my affections. Mine is not the mushroom love of callow youth, but the sincere affection of mature years. And now, Adele, become my wife, and become the love-light of the handsome home I will shortly provide for you!"

Adele was silent for a moment, her gaze bent upon the ground, and it was evident that she was in deep contemplation.

Finally she looked up, an expression of resolution upon her fair face.

"No, Mr. Sheldon. I cannot marry you," she said.

"Cannot?" he gasped, taking a step nearer to her—"cannot? Why can you not?"

"You have no right to ask such a question, sir."

"I have the right! I love you, and I demand that you give me the reasons why you cannot marry me!" he cried, passionately.

"There are various reasons. In the first place, I do not love you, sir."

"Bah! a fig for that! You would learn to love me, once we were married. Besides, consider that you will be marrying wealth and station."

"I care not for that. It would be no temptation for me. And I could never learn to love you."

"Your second reason, girl?"

"I know nothing of your past record. You might have a dozen wives living, for all I know."

"Why, I was never married in my life!"

"I am not supposed to know about that."

"Ha! that is equivalent to saying I am a falsifier!"

"I said nothing of the sort, sir."

"Your third reason?"

"Is that I could never consent to marry a man old enough to be my father. So let that settle it. I have no more to say, and must be going."

"Stop!" the mine-owner cried, turning purple with rage. "You do not know whom you are dealing with, girl! Dare not move an inch until you hear me out, or it will be the worse for you. I am not the man to brook defeat—ah! no. I see how it all is. That black-hearted gambler, Rowdy Jack, has stolen you from me!"

"That is false!" Adele cried, warmly. "I detest him as much as I do you!"

"Ha! You detest me, do you? Curse you, girl! I'll make you crawl at my feet yet—mind you that! You ought to be well aware that I am master in Buckshot Camp, and my word is law. Now, do you again refuse to marry me, Adele Jackpot?"

"I do now most positively refuse!" was the prompt answer.

"Then you are lost. My power in Buckshot Camp is such that my word is above question. You have scorned and rejected me, and I will have revenge. When I return to the camp, every one shall know that you are no longer a respectable and moral character. That is all—you may go!"

And the wretch laughed in demoniac triumph.

Poor Adele!

White as death, she staggered away a few paces, and then pausing, she looked back, and uttered but a single word:

"Monster!"

Then she fell to the ground in a deathlike swoon.

At the same moment there sprung from behind a huge boulder near at hand a man, who, with indignant mien, confronted the villainous mine-owner.

He was as fine a specimen of manhood as one could wish to gaze upon—tall, well-proportioned, and with the broad chest and swelling muscles of a Hercules.

His face was clear-cut and classic of feature, yet dark and swarthy as a Spaniard's. His eyes were black, his graceful mustache, goatee, and long, flowing hair of the same color.

His attire consisted of top-boots, gold-fringed pantaloons, a pleated white shirt, with broad collar thrown open at the throat, a purple velvet jacket, and a Spanish sombrero, pinned up at the left side with a diamond-studded star.

A handsome, dashing and picturesque-looking fellow, but the glitter in his midnight eyes caused George Sheldon to quail.

"Cowardly villain!" the stranger hissed, "you little suspected that your devilish threat was overheard!"

"And care less!" Sheldon replied, trying to put on a bold front. "What may be your name, my fantastic Greaser friend?"

"I am a Spaniard, you cur, and you know what a Spaniard's hate is! As for my name, it is Don Juan Carlos, and I am a man in whose veins the princely blood of honor flows fast and with exceeding warmth. You, sir, are a mongrel cur and a ruffian!"

"Take care, sir, how you talk to me!" Sheldon cried, turning red with rage, although in his heart of hearts he feared this dashing stranger, and wished himself well out of his presence. "You plainly do not know who you are talking to."

"To a contemptible wretch and monster!" was the quick retort. "I care not if you were a king, you low-lived scoundrel; I fear you not. I overheard your conversation with yonder innocent maiden, and your villainous threat to ruin her fair name, out of revenge, because she refused to marry you. Oh, you coward—you demon! I've a notion to kill you where you stand."

"But no; it shall not be said that Don Carlos stained his hand with a coward's blood, for he is wont to meet only brave men."

"Mind you, however, George Sheldon, or whoever you are, dare to asperse yonder girl's fair name ever, either by word or insinuation, and I will put a dagger through your black heart if I have to follow you to the furthestmost limits of the earth!"

"Go, now, and thank Don Juan Carlos that you still live!"

The Spaniard's right forefinger pointed commandingly toward Buckshot Camp, and without a word Sheldon stalked away, and disappeared down the mountain-side.

He was only too glad to accept the order to go, for the stranger had inspired him with real terror.

CHAPTER V.

SHELDON AND SANTA FE SAL.

AFTER Sheldon was out of sight, Don Juan stood for the space of five minutes gazing down toward the twinkling lights of the mining-camp.

His figure was drawn erect, as though he expected some foeman to attack him; his hands, white and soft as a woman's, were clinched until the nails fairly cut the flesh.

His face was dark with passion, while his eyes gleamed with a vengeful light.

Thus he stood, without uttering a syllable, until he suddenly seemed to remember poor Adele, lying so white and silent, only a few feet away.

He went quickly, and knelt by her side, and gazed into her face, which was upturned to the light of the moon.

"Beautiful!" was his comment, "and yet, that wretch would have ruined her fair name, for the sake of revenge. Ah! George Sheldon, I'll watch you closely! You are fast nearing the end of your rope."

He at once set to work at chafing Adele's hands, and trying to restore her to consciousness.

There was no water at hand, but he finally got her blood into circulation, and after a convulsive shuddering, she opened her eyes.

She gazed up into his face, searchingly, and then arose to a sitting posture.

"Has he gone?" she gasped, with a shudder.

"Yes, dear lady. I sent the dastardly wretch away, and you have nothing more to fear from him, for if he seeks to defame your character I have sworn to kill him. I do not believe he will dare run the risk of incurring my wrath. If he does, he is a dead man!"

"Who are you, sir?"

"A stranger in these parts, who arrived in time to save you, perhaps, from a worse fate than merely the villain's threat. My name is

Don Juan Carlos, lady, and I am a rover of the wide world."

"Then, pray accept my heartfelt thanks, sir, for your timely interference. George Sheldon is a bad, bad man. I never knew he was such a base villain, until he intercepted me to-night!"

"Ah! that's it. A person never knows a man until the true test comes, but it is morally certain that the bad points in a person will come out, sooner or later. There's not a shadow of a doubt but what Sheldon is a thoroughbred villain, but I don't believe he will trouble you any more. If he does, I'll not be far away, and I'll agree to dispose of his case, in short order, take my word for it."

"You are very kind, sir, and I wish I had some way of repaying you, but, unfortunately, I did not bring any money—"

"Tut! tut! Pray do not insult me by offering to pay me for protecting a woman from the villainy of a human demon. Any man with a spark of honor in him would protect an insulted woman. Your name is—"

"Adele. My father keeps the only saloon in the camp."

"A poor place for a young lady like you, is it not?"

"Oh! yes, sir. I have often tried to coax my father to go out of that low business, but he will not. But, you see I never enter the saloon. We have living rooms in the rear."

"Ah. I presume you have a number of beaux?"

"Oh! no. I have no beaux. All the people treat me kindly, but there is none among them I would accept as company."

They conversed for some time longer; then the Don escorted her to the outskirts of the camp, where they bade each other adieu, the Don reiterating his promise to see to it that George Sheldon did not molest Adele, a second time.

When Sheldon left Don Juan, he hurried rapidly toward the mining-camp, hoping to cool down the rancorous passion that burned within his breast; but rapid walking acted more as an excitant than a sedative, for by the time he reached the edge of the camp, he was in even a more furious state of rage than when he left the dashing Don.

"Curses on the fellow! Who can he be?" was the question the excited mine-owner puzzled himself with. "Is he really some perambulating Don, as he claims? No, no! I don't believe it! He speaks English well, but has the appearance of a Spaniard. Yet I do not believe he is what he represents. He made a threat against my life, unless I let up on Adele—curse her! I wonder if he would put it into execution. It won't do me any good to run any risks—I've got too much at stake. Still, the fellow may be a spy, and it won't do me any harm to have him silenced. I wonder how I'll work it?"

He meditated on the matter, as he walked along, but did not appear to arrive at any conclusion.

On reaching the camp he went direct to the Jackpot Saloon, where he learned of what had taken place there, earlier in the evening.

The dead miner's body had been removed, and Rowdy Jack was at the local doctor's, getting fixed up.

After hearing the details of the affair, Sheldon went thoughtfully to his own cabin.

It was not the largest in the camp, but was the most comfortably furnished, and boasted of many little luxuries foreign to those far-away mining abodes.

Unlocking the door, the mine-owner entered the habitation, and then closed and barred the door after him.

As he did so, his nostrils were greeted with the odor of tobacco smoke. He detected it more readily, because he did not use the weed, himself.

"What the deuce does this mean?" he exclaimed. "Hello! who is in this cabin?"

No answer.

All was intensely dark, and silent.

"I'll mighty soon see who is in here!" Sheldon growled, groping around.

He at last found a lamp, lit it, and turning the light on, glared about only to utter a startled ejaculation of astonishment.

Seated in an easy-chair, with her feet elevated on a writing-table, and a cigar between her fingers, was no less a person than Santa Fe Sal, apparently in full possession of solid enjoyment.

She nodded nonchalantly at the mine-owner, and pointed to a chair.

"Take a seat, gov'nor!" she said, "and make yourself at home. Nice evening out!"

George Sheldon stared at her, as if he could not believe the evidence of his senses.

"Who in thunderation are you?" he demanded, sternly, "and what in the deuce are you doing in my cabin?"

"You'r a reg'lar old hoss on expletives, ain't ye?" Sal observed. "So this is *your* shebang, ist it?"

"Yes, this is my shebang!"

"Oh! so it is! How absent-minded in me to forget it. Take a seat! take a seat!"

"Will you tell me who you are, and what you are doing here, or will you *not*?" thundered Sheldon.

"Why, cert, old socks—cert, I will! Down whar I cum from they call me Santa Fe Sal, the Slasher, 'cause when I git inter a soiree, an' hev a six-inch bowie, I kin carve the hull crowd, in no time!"

"Ha! you're the murderess!"

"The *what*?"

"The murderess of—"

"Whoa! slow up there, now! A little of that goes a good ways. I'm not a murderess, nor anything o' the sort. I put a pill in thet feller's cabeza, 'ca'se I'd told him if he come for me he was a dead man. He came, and you bet he went, quicker'n he came. I was justified in saltin' him, 'cause they wanted to skin an old organ-grinder and me, too."

"Nevertheless you are a murderess, and your neck will pay the penalty of your crime!"

"They haven't got me yet!"

"I can very easy give the alarm!"

"But, come now, you wouldn't do anything so mean as that, would you?" and Santa Fe Sal smiled sweetly, while a cocked revolver came up within the scope of Sheldon's vision.

"You'd better take a seat, George. You look awful tired and tuckered out. Your nasal appendage don't indicate that you are addicted to the flowing bowl, or I should recommend that you take a dose of invigorating essence, to brace you up. Sit down, George—sit right down, and make yourself at home. No hurry 'bout callin' in yer finest police, just yet;—I'm in no particular hurry. When I fall in wi' an old fagot like you, I like to have a pleasant chat. So sit right down!"

During this harangue Santa Fe Sal's weapon had kept on a dead line with the mine-owner's heart, and he was fully conscious of the fact; so, with a smothered oath, he sunk upon a chair.

Santa Fe Sal then laid her revolver upon the table, within easy reach.

"How did you get in here?" Sheldon growled.

"Oh! just walked in, in the usual everyday style. I found the door unlocked, and, as the night was rather warm without, at that particular moment, I thought I'd come in, and cool off."

"You lie!—the door was not unlocked!"

"Oh! well, maybe it wasn't. You see I am so absent-minded, sometimes, that I get the horse before the cart. Anyhow, I got in. After I found you lived here, I was glad I came."

"How so?"

"Oh! because. Knowin' you was a big-bug, I concluded of course you'd be in need of a secretary, or a clerk, and ef any one can suit you, I can."

"You'll get a clerkship in a hotter place than this camp, before the night's over!" was the grim response.

"Not a bit! I'm to be your clerk from now, on. I'm a person of great influence, especially in law matters, should your affairs get mixed up in court."

George Sheldon winced.

"See here—you're a detective!" he declared, more positively than interrogatively.

Santa Fe Sal laughed.

"Well, I don't mind telling you that I've read several stories about detectives," she retorted, with a shrug of her shoulders.

Sheldon shifted uneasily in his chair.

"You are here after me?" he said.

"I was!"

"Then, why are you not now?"

"Because I want a clerkship!"

"To the deuce with that! What do you want of that?"

"Well, you see, I've got myself in a boat by that scrape at the saloon, and need powerful influence. I heard before I came here that you ran the town, and make its people walk a chalk-line. You can take sides with me, make the people keep their hooks off from me, and I'll clerk for you."

Sheldon whistled.

"Ah! I see," he said. "And for that, you throw up the charge you have against me?"

"You've hit the bull's-eye!"

Sheldon reflected.

"Well, now, see here," he said. "I do control the will of the big majority of the people

in one way or another, but this matter of espousing your cause is a ticklish one. It depends according to what sort of a charge you have got against me. Do you see?"

Sal nodded.

"I have a bench warrant for your arrest for robbery, committed in Denver!" she answered.

"Ah!"

The mine-owner drew a sigh of relief, as much as to say:

"I am glad it's no worse!"

Aloud, he said:

"A bench warrant will take a man wherever found?"

"It will—anywhere in the United States, or Territories."

"Are there others on the case?"

"Yes. But I am the only one who traced you here."

At this a strange gleam entered the mine-owner's eyes, that Sal apparently did not notice.

"Then you swear that, if I free you from all danger of disturbance by our people, you will throw up the job, become my clerk, and work to the end of screening me from that charge?"

"I swear it!" Santa Fe Sal declared, lifting her hand.

"Very well! I'll fix it. You remain here, and I will go and see what I can do. Under no circumstances leave the cabin, as there may be spies in the vicinity who would gobble you up, and, once you got in the hands of the mob, I could do nothing for you."

"Very well. When you return you will find me here."

So George Sheldon took his departure, a diabolical smile wreathing his countenance, once he was outside the cabin.

That he meant mischief was evident!

CHAPTER VI.

DETECTIVES IN COUNCIL.

SANTA FE SAL well enough knew, by Sheldon's ready acceptance of her proposal, that he had an object in view, and that object was clear to her mind.

Having told him that she was the only one in the camp representing his Denver case, if he could set the mob on her, and thus secure her destruction, that would rid himself of his only immediate enemy.

"You are the fool, Mr. George Sheldon," she muttered, after he had gone. "You shouldn't believe everything you hear. As you propose to play the smart on me, *au revoir*!"

She arose, tiptoed to the door, and listened.

All was silent without.

The hour was so late, many of the miners and their families were in bed.

Lifting the latch, she found that she could open the door.

This, in some degree, was a surprise, for she had had an idea that Sheldon had secured it on the outside. Such, however, was not the case, and she was free to step out in the open air.

She had little fear of spies being in the vicinity, as it was not probable that any one had known of her presence at the cabin prior to Sheldon's leaving it.

And so it proved.

Most of the cabins in the immediate vicinity were dark, and she had no difficulty in stealing away and getting beyond the confines of the camp.

Then she hastened along the mountain-side to the southward.

She continued on, without pausing, until she had gone mayhap three miles.

At this point her further progress was interfered with by a terrible abyss that crossed her path. It was, perhaps, a hundred feet from side to side, and its walls ran perpendicularly downward, to a considerable depth, while above the mountains towered far toward the sky.

From the depths of this mountain seam came the faint roar and rush of water.

Searching carefully around, Santa Fe Sal soon succeeded in finding a pine cone, which she ignited with a match, and soon had a bright light.

She then bent over the ledge, and held this torch to get a view into the abyss for some distance.

On the side where she was, a thick net-work of heavy vines began at the edge of the ledge, and ran down the rocky wall until they could no longer be seen.

"Yes, this is the point," the girl said, "and now for the descent. It isn't every one that would have the nerve to try it, but I guess I have."

She flung the torch into the abyss, and watched its downward descent.

Down, down, down it went, with great rapid-

ity, until the flame seemed but a spark, and then finally disappeared altogether.

Then, securing her weapons properly, Santa Fe Sal caught hold of the top vines, and swung herself over the edge of the precipice. It was certainly a daring, if not foolhardy undertaking.

The vines creaked and swayed under her weight, and it seemed as if the slender strands that ran to the top of the cliff must give way, and precipitate the venturesome girl into the depths of the yawning chasm; but, judging by the fearlessness and agility with which she went downward, she had tried the novel ladder before.

Many minutes were consumed, before the bottom of the rift was reached.

Here all was densest darkness.

She stood still at the point where her feet touched the stone bottom, and putting her fingers to her lips, blew a shrill whistle.

The effect was startling.

The sound went detonating loud and distinct along the rocky walls, until, after several seconds, it died out in the distance.

A few moments after the signal the light of a bull's-eye lantern burst forth, only a few feet from her and a man approached.

"Is that you, Sally?" he asked.

"Yes, here I am."

"Then, follow me!"

He turned and retraced his footsteps, Santa Fe Sal following.

For a quarter of a mile, they proceeded, and then suddenly came upon a large camp-fire, in rounding a curve.

The fire was located under an extensive ledge of outspreading rock, so that no reflection of it reached the top of the chasm, above.

Seated around the fire, were three persons.

One, and the most noticeable, was the Spanish-looking individual whom we have before met—Don Juan Carlos.

The second person was of about Don's own age, but a true American in personal appearance.

He was tall, well built, and had a handsome physiognomy, almost boyish in appearance, lit up by a pair of brilliant dark eyes. His face was clean shaven, and his hair cut close to his head. His hair, however, was as white as driven snow, and there were care-lines upon his forehead, stamped there by some deep trouble.

Near him, on the rocks, lay a long-haired wig, showing that he was wont to conceal his white hairs, when in public.

The third person was old Alvin Green, the organ-grinder, and near at hand were his organ and monkey—the homely beast that had done such fearful havoc to Rowdy Jack's good looks.

The man who had conducted Santa Fe Sal to this scene, was a sharp-featured, ferret-eyed fellow of diminutive stature, whose looks would not favorably impress a skeptic that he was any too honest.

The appearance of Santa Fe Sal caused the men about the camp-fire to rise, and give her words of welcome.

"We were afraid some ill had befallen you, lady," the man with the gray hair said, "and have been anxiously waiting for your coming."

"I am rather late, that's a fact," the girl detective answered, "but I suppose Alvin has told you one of the causes."

"Yes, indeed, and that was one of the causes for our uneasiness. Tell us how you came out."

Santa Fe Sal complied, by giving in detail all that had occurred from the time of Alvin's flight up to the time of her leaving Sheldon's cabin, and setting out for the rift rendezvous.

"The shooting of the miner is likely to prove detrimental to our interests," the gray-haired man remarked. "It bars you from the freedom of the camp, at a time when so much depended upon you."

"Not at all, Mr. Ball," Sal replied, confidently. "In the morning, I shall be in the camp again, as big as life, and twice as natural."

"But, in disguise, of course?"

"Cert! I have a goodly assortment of disguises, concealed near the camp, and when it comes to 'makin' up' I'm a reg'lar stage actor."

"So Sheldon is wary, and on his guard?"

"You bet! He don't mean to be taken from the camp, without a fight. He's got big backin', and a boodle to pay for it. How did you make out, Mr. Ball?"

"Good. There's not the shadow of a doubt but what your original suspicion was correct. I am thoroughly satisfied."

"Then, that is all required, except the proofs. They will be hard to get, I fear, and it is confounded unlucky the crowd got on to Alvin, so

hard, for it renders his 'fake,' practically out of the race. I don't reckon you'd like to try it over again, eh, Alvin?"

And Santa Fe Sal laughed heartily.

"No; one trial of that kind is enough!" the old man replied, his eyes wide open, and form erect, showing conclusively that he was neither blind, nor decrepit.

"Did you see any one besides Sheldon, that a finger might be pointed at?" Ball asked.

"No one, in particular. I had no time to observe, in fact. I can do better, to-morrow. The idea I have is, to spot Sheldon's most intimate ally, and he's our man to work."

"How about Rowdy Jack, the man who pitched onto me?" queried Alvin.

"I haven't formed an opinion, yet. There may be something in him, and there may not. About the only thing that's troubling me, now, is how we are going to get Sheldon out of Buckshot. He will be ready for us, and you can bet every man in the camp will swear by him!"

"I see no other way than to let Mr. Bokus, here, fetch us the backing he claims he can get," Ball responded, looking at the man with the ferret eyes and sharp features.

Santa Fe Sal also took a keen look at the man, who withstood the scrutiny without flinching.

"I am not quite sure about Bokus," Sally said, directly—"not quite sure. He may be solid meat, but it may also be indigestible and worthless."

"If you think I'd go back on you, after what you've done by me, you are very much mistaken," Bokus spoke up, with spirit. "Didn't you find me starving and wounded, in the mountains, a week ago, and didn't you take me in and care for me? Do you suppose I'd be ingrate enough, to go back on you?"

"Maybe not. You say you were put on parole, for sleeping at your post—that is, banished from the camp, with the privilege of returning in a week?"

"Yes. The week expired yesterday."

"Discouraged at the reproof, you sought to seek civilized parts, but was shot and wounded by some unknown person?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You claim that this Captain Clymer is an outlaw, and is your half-brother?"

"He is. We are all outlawed, the whole fifty of us."

"You claim Clymer will do anything you request him to do?"

"He will. He never has refused me a favor. But he is stern, as to discipline. I had been drinking, or else I'd have never neglected my duty."

"You claim that Clymer and his men are working a secret mine, and are well armed, and horsed, and are desperate and daring fellows, always ready for fight?"

"You bet! They're a wild set of fellows, and life in the mines is dull, and they would like no better sport than ride into a camp, and gobble all the bug-juice they could get hold of. I know I could get them to back you just for the sport and whisky they could corral. My step-brother is as big a devil as the rest."

"But, it doesn't look likely they would leave their secret mine, for fear some one would invade it."

"Oh! they do that, frequently, leaving one guard behind. When they do, they take a night's ride through the mountains and raise such a pandemonium that they scare the wolves right into fits. If you want 'em, all you've got to do is to say the word, and I can get them for you."

"How far from here is this secret mine?"

"That's a secret I am bound by oath not to reveal. As long as I furnish you the assistance you need to accomplish your purpose, you ought not to ask me. If you want the men, I can have them in the vicinity of Buckshot camp on twenty-four hours' notice."

"Very well. I will give you notice when to start for them. And now, Alvin, that your hand-organ racket is dished, what are you going to do?"

"That's for you to say, Santa. You're the boss, and I am under your instructions."

"Well, I'll see if I can't trump up some sort of a part for you in the morning. As for your case, Don Carlos, I have not been able to do anything yet. But I hope to, to-morrow."

"I have already made one discovery myself," the Don replied, whereupon he related his adventure upon the mountain-side. "The girl, Adele, reminds me of the one I seek, and she is living with the man who keeps the saloon in Buckshot."

"That man is known as Old Jackpot!"

"I don't know. You have the case, and I will leave you to work it out."

"Very well. Alvin, you and I return to Buckshot in the morning. The others will remain here, for a safer place does not exist in Arizona. If things work right to-morrow, you can bet Santa Fe Sal won't be long in winding up the case!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE MADAME FROM EUROPE.

SANTA FE SAL had not misjudged George Sheldon when she formed the opinion that he meant her mischief. That was the very thing the villainous mine-owner did mean, in dead earnest.

"Curse the girl!" he muttered, as he made his way toward the Jackpot Saloon. "She's a detective, is she, and wants me for the Denver safe-robbery? Perhaps she wants me on other charges also? She's a cute one, that's flat, and as cool as a cucumber—too dangerous a person by half to be in my way. She's got into trouble, and wants me to help her out on the promise of withdrawing the charge she has against me. That would be a fine thing for me to do now, wouldn't it? Yes, Miss Santa Fe Sal, as you call yourself. I'll help you, but it will be into the scrape, instead of out!"

When he reached the Jackpot Saloon he found a matter of fifty people still gathered there, engaged in discussing the tragic death of John Hall, the miner.

The appearance of Sheldon tended to check the confab, as all were anxious to know what he proposed.

"Come up, boys, and have something," was the proposal, when he entered the bar-room. "I see you all look thirsty." And he tossed a ten-dollar gold-piece to Old Jackpot, as a "tip" to let the crowd have what they wanted.

Nor did they refuse to drink, as may be supposed.

When the "treat" had been imbibed, Sheldon looked the crowd over, and said:

"Boys, I have been thinking over the matter of the shooting of John Hall, and have come to the conclusion that it was a foul and atrocious crime!"

The crowd uttered a murmur of approval.

"That's jest our sentiment," spoke up a miner. "John was as squar' a man as thar was in the camp, an' ef he was a leetle hasty in venturin' for'd, contrary to the gal's orders, she hadn't no bizness to plug him."

"Of course not. It was a foul and a bare-faced murder, and lynching is the fate the offender should be treated to when she is caught. She is evidently a desperate character; the very fact that she sports around in men's clothing is against her, and casts a reproach on the fair reputation of your wives and daughters. I say the woman ought to be strung up without mercy!"

"Hurray! hurray! Of course she had!" chorused the crowd. "But where is she? She can't be found—she's sloped!"

"Nothing of the sort. Now, look here. I know just where she can be found, but before I tell you, you must promise me this—that you will follow me with the utmost stealth, or she may give you the slip."

"We promise! we promise!" cried the men, in one voice. "Lead ahead, boss!"

"Get your halter ready before you go, so there may be no delay!" Sheldon ordered. "There's a tree right near where she will be found!"

No time was lost in procuring the lariat, and making a noose of one end of it that would have done credit to the mythological Judge Lynch himself.

Then cautioning his followers again to silence Sheldon led the way from the Jackpot.

Out-of-doors the camp was quiet. Those who had not been at the saloon were at home and in their beds.

Silently and like so many grim shadows of the night, the gang stole toward the Sheldon cabin, in the mellow light of the soaring moon.

At last the cabin was reached, and by the mine-owner's directions, the men filed to either side of the doorway.

Then Sheldon opened the door and stepped into the room, a smile of triumph playing over his face.

The next instant, however, he uttered a bitter malediction, that brought the crowd to the door.

"She's gone! she's gone!" Sheldon cried. "Quick! scour the neighborhood, and we may be able to nab her yet!"

With yells of rage at being defeated the second time, the gang began to beat about in every direction, but of course they had their labor for

nothing; and at last, a crestfallen crowd, they went back to Sheldon's cabin and demanded an explanation.

The mine-owner gave the full particulars—of course screening himself as much as possible—and succeeded in lulling the sudden ill-feeling that seemed to have arisen.

That ended the disturbances of the night, so far as Buckshot Camp was concerned.

The next day dawned bright and clear, and the miners were, as usual, early astir, and went to their work, which left somewhat less than half of the population about town.

Among the noticeable things to be seen about the camp were several conspicuously-posted placards, containing the following:

"\$500 REWARD!

"The citizens of Buckshot Camp will pay the above reward for the capture, dead or alive, of the murderess of John Hall, who was shot and killed in the Jackpot Saloon by a woman calling herself Santa Fe Sal, on the evening of the 12th instant.

"By order of
"COMMITTEE OF CITIZENS."

A purse had already been raised for the purpose, Rowdy Jack and George Sheldon being two of the largest contributors to the fund.

One or two idle characters of the camp had set forth in search of the girl detective, but no one else seemed inclined to go tramping through the mountains on what would most likely be a wild-goose chase, even for the earning of so large a sum.

Rowdy Jack was at his accustomed table in the Jackpot, but a sorrier-looking specimen of humanity would be hard to imagine, for his face was literally one mass of bandages, and his hair had all been shaved off, in order that his scalp might be "doctored."

Although suffering acute pain, he was a man of "nerve," and persisted in sitting at his table.

The forenoon was about half-gone, when Buckshot Camp was treated to another surprise, in the shape of a horse and rider, who suddenly appeared in front of the Jackpot Saloon.

The horse was raw-boned, knock-kneed, and skeleton poor.

The woman was of medium height, and corpulent in figure. Her face was so thickly veiled that not a feature could be distinguished.

She was attired in a black silk riding-habit, which though it had seen use, was in good condition. Her hat was a sort of straw turban, but wholly enveloped by the veil, and her hair was worn in a long black coil down to her waist. Her hands were gloved in kid.

Dismounting gracefully, she at once made inquiry if there was a cabin or tent for rent in the camp.

Old Jackpot, "allowed" that he had a tent which he would put up for the small consideration of one hundred dollars per month in advance.

The woman gave her name as Madame Samuels, said she was from Europe, was a clairvoyant and fortune-teller; and taking a large wad of notes from her pocket, she paid down the demanded rent.

In less than half an hour the tent was up, opposite the Jackpot Saloon, and the madame was its occupant.

Shortly afterward a double-sheet poster, hand lettered, was pinned to one of the laps of the tent, announcing as follows:

"MADAME EUGENIA SAMUELS,

Marvelous Clairvoyant, and Fortune-Teller!

FROM EUROPE!

THE WONDER OF THE WORLD!

REVEALS THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE!

Tells the Present Whereabouts of Missing Persons!

Sittings Hourly, Every Day!

Satisfaction Guaranteed, Or No Pay.

Fortunes Told, \$1. Clairvoyant Sittings, \$5.

Call and Satisfy Yourselves!"

As may be supposed, this notice caused a sensation, and created any amount of curiosity all day long.

But as a rule, miners are a superstitious set, and gamblers are not easily hoodwinked, and so it came to pass that no one visited the madame's tent during the day.

Which made it look rather sick for her hundred-dollar investment.

Just at dusk, when he thought he would be

least observed, Rowdy Jack crossed over from the Jackpot and entered the tent.

The madame politely bade him be seated, and then asked:

"Do you want a clairvoyant sitting, or simply your fortune told?"

"The sitting, of course!" was the gruff reply.

"Very well. I will throw myself into a trance, and see what I can learn of your past, present and future. Sit perfectly still, lest you frighten away the spirits, and break the spell."

Rowdy Jack's lip curled with sarcasm, for he had no faith in this woman's business whatever. He had simply come over to while away the time, as there was nothing doing at the Jackpot.

"You were born of rich and influential parents," said Madame Samuels, after a silence of several minutes, "but committed an offense, before you were of age, that caused you to leave home. You drifted about here and there, took to gambling, and finally became the tool of another, and committed a hideous crime."

Rowdy Jack started at this, and uttered an oath.

"You are an accursed liar!" he cried, fiercely. "I'll listen to no more such nonsense, and as for your fee, you can whistle for that!" and rising, he stalked out of the tent, evidently in high dudgeon.

Had the madame read his past correctly? It surely would appear so, else why his sudden start and anger?

A little later in the evening George Sheldon came along, and paused to read the madame's poster.

Then he gave vent to a "humph!" and entered the Jackpot Saloon.

As usual, he called the crowd up to "have something," and while the drinking was going on he took advantage of the opportunity to "size up" every man in the room.

All were familiar faces, and he drew a breath of relief.

There were care-lines upon the mine-owner's face to-night that were not there yesterday—lines that bespoke an uneasy frame of mind.

In truth, George Sheldon was far from being as confident and free from worry as he was before his encounter with Santa Fe Sal and Don Juan Carlos.

He was now restless, suspicious, and fear-stricken.

He expected to see a detective lurking everywhere he went, crouching ready to spring upon him.

Something unusual for him, he called for a glass, and drank with the crowd.

Then he took a turn up and down the room, and left the saloon.

"I've a great mind to try it," he muttered, glancing over in the direction of Madame Samuels's tent. "I've often heard said that these clairvoyants could make some wonderful disclosures and predictions, even if most of their business is a humbug. I wonder if this woman could touch my case?"

He hesitated a few minutes, and then went over to the tent and entered.

"Can you tell me that which I want to know?" he demanded, tersely.

"Be seated, sir. I can tell you of your past, present, and future. But I must have my fee in advance, as one customer refused to pay me because I told him the truth, not long since."

"How much is your fee?"

"Five dollars."

"Here are ten. Now go ahead."

The madame caught the gold coin he tossed to her, and stowed it away in her pocket.

Then she remained silent for several minutes, when she said:

"Ah, yes, I see. You have been married—twice. By your first marriage you had a son, who grew up to manhood, and also married."

"Yes! yes! Tell me of him—where is he?"

"The father and son were in business together!" the madame went on, without heeding him.

"Let me see. Ah! yes; there was a forgery, upon another house. The son was arrested and convicted, and sentenced to five years imprisonment."

"Is he in prison, now?"

"The chief evidence against the son, was given by the father, who soon afterward fraudulently closed up the business, and with the son's wife, left for the West!"

"Stop!" the mine-owner cried, angrily. "That's quite sufficient, in that direction. I only want to know one more thing—is that son still in prison?"

"He is!"

"Very well. Good-evening!"

And rising, George Sheldon left the tent.

"One more relief!" he muttered, when out-

side. "Things are not so bad as I feared. And now, if I can by any means get this Santa Fe woman put out of the way, my prospects of being safe and secure are still good. And this accursed girl detective must be put out of the way, at all hazards. She's game, and it won't be long before she will be back in camp, again. And I'll watch and wait for her, with patience, and if worst comes to worst, they shall never take me from this camp, without they have an army to back them. Oh! no!"

And the villain chuckled, confidently.

CHAPTER VIII.

SANTA FE GETS PULLED.

In the mean time, something was going on at the Jackpot Saloon, that commands attention.

The crowd at the place, to-night, was much larger than on the preceding night, and the Jackpot was doing a rattling business.

The front of the bar was continually lined by an array of bibulous individuals, who sought to quench their thirst by gulping down potions of the liquid fire dealt out as "good" whisky, by Old Jackpot, while the tables were all surrounded by devotees of the games of chance. Money changed hands like magic, brains grew thicker from the effects of strong drink, and everything was noisy and merry.

Old Jackpot's face was as smiling as a ray of summer sunshine, as he gathered in the shekels, while Rowdy Jack in a measure forgot his personal injuries, as he raked in the spoils, at the card table.

About the middle of the evening, when things in general were going off, swimmingly, a character, new to the camp, sauntered into the saloon, and swaggering up to the bar, called for whisky.

He was what might be called a tough, so far as personal appearance went.

He was not over medium height; or very massive of frame, and his attire was coarse and ill-fitting, consisting of heavy stogy boots, overalls, a dirty red shirt, and a bullet-riddled hat of the sombrero order, the rim turned down behind, and up, in front. A belt around his waist contained a revolver, and a large keen-edged bowie-knife.

His face was almost entirely covered with a shaggy black beard, and the color of his nasal appendage indicated that "bug-juice" and he were not strangers.

"Whisky!" he ordered, in a rather belligerent manner, "an' I want some wi' thistles an' cactus-burrs in et, so ye ken feel et tickle, as et goes down. None o' yer common dish-water fer this hyer gerloot. I'm Howlin' Hank from Hardpan. I am, an' I've got ther rocks ter say I kin make everybody tremble when I holler. Who is all these yere pesky pilgrims? Can't yer introduce a feller?"

"D'ye want to ask the gentlemen to drink?" queried Old Jackpot, with a bland demeanor, and likewise an eye to business. "Ef yer do, why, undoubtedly, the gentlemen will have great pleasure in forming your acquaintance."

"Drink? On course they kin drink. A bigger lot o' swill-tossers I never seed in my life. Tell 'em ter mazarkey right up an' blow in ther beverage wi' Howlin' Hank, the hard man from Hardpan. Hooray! Say, old hook-nose, aire this arsenic, or corrosive sublimate? Understand I want nothin' but ther genuine stuff. I'm p'izen, myself, an' they say p'izen aire an anecdote fer p'izen."

"Gentlemen, you're invited to drink with Howlin' Hank from Hardpan!" Old Jackpot sung out. "If you have any regards for the feelings of your best you will not refuse to at least wet your lips."

The crowd scrambled to the bar in lively order, and it chanced that Rowdy Jack got alongside of Howlin' Hank from Hardpan.

Jack's visage was far from a handsome one, in its present patched-up state, and the man from Hardpan surveyed it with an amused chuckle.

"I say, pardner," he observed, "yer kinder look as ef ye war afflicted with er case o' mother-in-law, you do, by gum!"

"I don't know that it is any of your business!" Jack retorted. "You better keep your eyes and your mouth to yourself, or—"

"Or what?"

Howling Hank spoke quite coolly, but evidently meant the question should be answered.

"Why, I'll fix you!" Rowdy Jack replied, showing his pearly teeth, which were tightly shut together.

"You'll fix me, eh?"

"Yes, I'll fix you, and I don't want no more of your lip, neither!"

"Who are you?"

"I'm Rowdy Jack, and I started the cemetery in this town, wi' three stiff!"

Howling Jack gave vent to a grunting sort of laugh.

"Guess you must 'a' bin tacklin' the fourth one, by ther looks o' yer mug!" he allowed.

Rowdy Jack was by this time literally boiling over with rage, but seemed to have a little hesitation in tackling this stranger, despite his bluster.

"See here—d'ye know what I've a mind to do?" he roared, stepping closer to the man from Hardpan.

"What?" the latter inquired, looking the gambler straight in the eye.

"Why, I've got a good notion to blow the whole top of your cussed head off!"

The crowd were by this time inclined to become very much interested, for there was every indication that there would be "a muss."

"So you've a notion to decapitate the cupola of my ball of intellect, have ye?" Howlin' Hank serenely inquired. "You've got a orthodox idea of blowin' the whole top surface o' my head off, hev ye?"

"Yes I have!"

"Don't think ye could do it, friend. This hyer globe o' mine have bin through many a ragin' cyclone, an' many a belligerent blizzard, an' I tell ye et takes more wind than you've got to blow any portion of et off. Come! goin' to have suthin'?"

"Yes, I'm goin' to hev suthin'!" Rowdy Jack cried, grating his teeth together. "I'm goin' to thin out yer whiskers, so the wind will blow through them?"

And, quick as a wink, the gambler grasped Howlin' Hank by the beard and gave it a fierce jerk.

The result was most startling.

The beard was false, and the jerk fetched it clean from Howlin' Hank's face.

A wild cry went up.

"Santa Fe Sal!" cried a dozen voices, in a chorus.

"Yes! Santa Fe Sal, gentlemen!" was the quick reply, as the girl detective stepped back from the bar; "Santa Fe Sal, the Slasher, an' don't you fergit it. An' now, lookee here!"—and she drew her bowie-knife and ran her thumb over its keen edge—"I jst want to give ye a pinter on one thing. I know you're all down on me, 'cause I stopped yer pardner from breathin', but you know one thing—I did it in self-defense. An' that's the way I'm goin' to fight now, providing you tackle me. I didn't come here to-night to fight, but all the same, I ain't goin' to take water, not for a cent's worth! Ef you're bound to crowd on me, all I ask is that you leave yer shootin'-irons alone, and draw yer carvin' tools, an' meet me more on terms of equality. I'd rather not have any scrimmage with you at all, fer some one's bound to get dissected, but ef yer bound ter all pit yerselves ag'in' one lone girl, you'll be pretty apt to find Santa Fe Sal right to home, and the latch-string out!"

In a ringing, fearless tone did the girl detective utter her proclamation, and stood facing the crowd, without a vestige of alarm perceptible upon her face.

The crowd held back and glared at her fiercely.

Revolvers were drawn in every hand, nearly, but were not made use of.

Had the girl's words put these rude denizens of the mines to shame?

Even Rowdy Jack seemed to hesitate from ordering an attack, although the evil gleam in his eyes boded no good for the fair detective.

"Curse you!" the gambler fiercely cried. "You needn't expect you are goin' to escape us this time, me daisy. Put up that knife and surrender, or you're a dead gosling in the wink of an eye."

"I'll put up the knife, when I am assured that hostilities toward me are withdrawn," Santa Fe Sal replied, "and not until then. As I said before, I didn't return here for a fight, and so what's the use of your all takin' up arms against me. If you're for peace so am I. If you're for war, you bet I'm a reg'lar steel cruiser, an' ready fer the siege."

"You won't surrender, then?"

"Nary a surrender!"

"Then, boys, do yer duty. Yer know what Sheldon said—that the girl deserved death. An' ye know ther reward that's offered for her, dead or alive. So up wi' yer pops, an' let her have, all at once!"

Not a weapon was raised.

The men stood there, grim and immovable.

"I reckon, boss," said one fellow, who was a sort of ruling spirit among the miners—"I

reckon, boss, thet et wouldn't be fair fer all us fellers ter blaze away at ther gal, even ef she did pop over our pard. She hez only ther knife in her flipper, an' she's game enough ter meet any of us, wi' a like weepion; tharfore, et would look mighty cowardly uv us ter not give her a fair show fer her white alley. Eh! boyees?"

There was a general murmur of assent from the crowd, several of whom restored their fire-arms to their belts.

"Ten thousand furies! Are you going to let the girl escape?" roared Rowdy Jack. "Never! she must not escape. At her, I say! I'll make the reward a hundred better to the man who takes her, dead or alive!"

But, even this magnanimity on the part of Jack, did not have the effect to accomplish his murderous designs.

The men of one accord, held back, and seemed to look to Pete Painter, the miner before alluded to, for directions.

Pete was brawny, and big-hearted, with some sterling points about him, and he shook his head grimly, in answer to Rowdy Jack's offer.

"I ain't goin' ter take thet kind o' a hand ag'in' the gal!" he declared. "Ther boyees kin suit themselves, but I drop out. Ef ye'r so anxious to do the gal up, Rowdy Jack, why don't ye sail in an' tackle her, yourself?"

"I ain't afeard to," was the growling answer.

"You fellers want the reward worse than I do!"

"I'm not itchin' for any of it!" chuckled Painter, seeing beyond doubt that the gambler was afraid of the girl from Santa Fe.

"Nor I!" "Nor I!" came a chorus of declarations from those, who a moment before, had been up in arms against the murderess of John Hall.

Rowdy Jack swore roundly, and was furious with passion, for he could not conceive why the tide of public sentiment had taken such a sudden turn.

"You are a cussed lot of coyotes!" he cried—"ye ain't fit fer snakes ter feed on. I'll show ye that Rowdy Jack ain't no coward, nor ain't afraid o' no man, woman, or wild beast, that ever lived."

He took a step forward, drawing and cocking a revolver, as he did so.

His arm raised until the barrel of the weapon came on a range with his uninjured eye.

Then, there was a sharp report!

But, it was not the gambler's weapon that had spoken!

Instead, a cry of pain escaped Rowdy Jack, and his weapon fell to the floor, from a nerveless grasp.

He had been shot through the wrist, and that member was shattered, a stream of crimson trickling from it, to the floor.

At the same instant, Don Juan Carlos entered the saloon!

CHAPTER IX.

A WONDERFUL STORY.

THE pain of the injured wrist caused Rowdy Jack to turn deathly pale; he reeled toward the bar, clutching at it for support, but missed it, and fell insensible to the floor.

Man of nerve though he prided himself on being, this last dose of pain had proven too much for him.

Several miners picked him up, and he was borne into an adjoining room, which constituted one of the living apartments of old Jackpot and his daughter.

This matter of looking after the injured wretch attracted so much attention from the crowd that scarcely any notice was taken of the entrance of Don Juan.

Santa Fe Sal saw him, however, and beyond giving him a grateful glance, made no token that she knew him.

The Spaniard walked up to the bar, laid down a gold-piece, and signified by a wave of his hand that the crowd were invited to drink.

But Old Jackpot did not chance to be behind the bar just at that moment, and there was, consequently, a short delay in getting the desired liquor.

"Skuse me, pardner," Pete Painter said, tapping the dashing sport upon the shoulder, "but ef ye hain't got any objections ter tellin', we galoots allers kind o' likes ter know who we hists p'izen wi', jest fer sociability's sake."

"Certainly, sir. You may call me Don Juan Carlos," was the easy and graceful answer.

"Ye don't say? Wal, my name is Pete Painter, an' occasionally, when I kiver too much benzeen, I paints the town red! But that ain't often, tho', an' generally I'm a purty square sort o' feller. I jest kept the gang from chawin' up that gal yonder, ef I do say it— Hey! hello! she's gone!"

This was true; Santa Fe Sal was no longer in the saloon.

"Yes, I saw her go out a moment ago," the Don said. "What was the trouble?"

"Oh, she came here in disguise, an' she an' Rowdy Jack got into an argyment, an' Jack pulled her false whiskers off. Then the crowd see'd she was the same hair-pin wot shot John Hall, and they were goin' ter riddle her, but I put in a say, an' kinder quieted 'em down. Jack was goin' ter shoot her then, only some one soaked him in the hand an' he fainted. Reckon you did it, didn't ye, stranger?"

The Don smiled quietly but made no answer, for just then Old Jackpot came behind the bar, and the eyes of the two men met in an inquiring stare.

The expression upon the face of the Don was one of cool confidence, combined with triumph, but Old Jackpot started perceptibly, and his yellowish, parchment-like skin seemed to grow a trifle whiter.

He did not wholly lose his self-possession, however, but shifted his gaze to the gold eagle upon the counter, smiled, and rubbed his hands blandly together.

"Ahem! gentlemen, what can I do for you?" he asked. "Pleasant evening, sir!"—to Don Juan.

"Quite!" the latter responded, dryly. "I'll have a little of your best whisky, and I presume the other gentlemen won't take anything weaker."

"Of course not—of course not, sir! Every one drinks whisky here in Buckshot Camp, and I flatter myself to say I keep the prime article on the range."

The long-necked black bottle and glasses were produced, and the drinks poured out.

There were less than a score of the miners who accepted the invitation to imbibe, some holding aloof, and others, still, looking after the welfare of Rowdy Jack.

The drinks were gulped down, and the miners turned away from the bar.

Not so with Don Juan.

He received his change, thrust it carelessly into his pocket, and then, leaning further over the bar, said, in a low rapid tone:

"It strikes me you and I have met before, old man!"

Old Jackpot's little, bead-like eyes sparkled with a peculiar, uninterpretable gleam.

"Do you think so?" he demanded. "Now, really, I think ye must be mistaken. I do not remember that I ever saw you before."

"You don't?"

"You bet. Indeed, I'm werry positive."

"So! so! Now, I was quite sure I recognized your mug, for it is by no means an ordinary one. Let me see—your name is—"

"Jeremiah Jackpot, at your service."

"Indeed! Rather a remarkable name, is it not?"

"A leetle odd, mebbe. But, then, the Jackpots of Vermont date back many generations."

"Ah! But, by the way, Jeremiah, did you not once bear another name—a name sounding something like Simeon Slater, and were you not once a roustabout, on a Mississippi river steamboat?"

There was perceptible irony in the Don's tone, as he put the query, and his keen gaze dwelt most searchingly upon the face of the hawkish seller of bad rum.

Jackpot put up his hands, as if in righteous surprise.

"I a roustabout on a Mississippi steamboat?" he ejaculated. "No! never! Believe me, I know nothin' 'bout ther Mississippi, at all, except that I crossed it when I came West, some years ago."

"How many years ago?"

"Oh! it must be nigh about ten, I guess."

"Or eleven, say, for instance!" and the Don smiled, in a provokingly cool manner. "So you never bore the name of Simeon Slater?"

"Never, so help me!"

"Jackpot, as you call yourself, you are a good liar, but you can't fool me. Oh! no!"

"What's that? You dare to call me a liar, sir?"

"I presume you heard the echo of my voice, sir?"

"An' you call me a liar in my own place! You take that back, or I'll put you out doors."

"You will?"

"Yes, an' I kin git plenty of help to do it with."

"Now, you're talkin'! Just whistle for some of your help, an' see 'em get on to my shape, before they tackle me. See 'em size me up before they proceed to swallow me! Why, Simeon, you don't know your man, dash me if you do!"

Old Jackpot glared at the dark sport, as if he would like to annihilate him.

"You are a fool! You are crazy!" he sputtered. "What do you come here for?"

"Just for fun, to get a look at you. You're such a handsome man, Simeon, that it's a wonder people don't come from miles around, to get a look at your hen-hawk countenance.

"Then, too, Simeon, I came for something else, and you ought to know what that something means?"

"My name is not Simeon, nor I don't know what you mean!" was the sullen exclamation. "You're mistaken in your man!"

"Not a bit of it!" the Don assured, blandly. "I've been on your trail for over a year, and with a little valuable detective assistance, have succeeded, at last, in locating both you and the girl!"

"What?"

The old whisky-seller now began to look both surprised and anxious.

"Just as I tell you!" Don Juan went on, confidently. "I met the girl to-day and recognized her. I chanced along in time to rescue her from a wretch who was trying to force her into a promise that she would marry him!"

"Who? Who?"

"One George Sheldon, a mine-owner, and as black-hearted a villain as ever lived!"

"No! no! You are very much mistaken. George Sheldon is a great and good gentleman, and he would not try to frighten or force my child."

"Bah! You and he are two of a kind, Simeon Slater, and his rope, at least, is playing out almost to the end!"

Old Jackpot had in the past few minutes grown perceptibly nervous, owing to the fact that the Don's steady stare never for once left his face.

"Who the deuce are you?" he finally managed to blurt out, the muscles of his face working spasmodically. "Who are you, and what brings you here?"

"Put some one behind the bar, and come and sit down over yonder, and you shall know all," was the reply.

Jackpot hesitated a few minutes, a scowl upon his face; then, curiosity seemed to get the better of him, and he got one of the gamblers to temporarily look after the bar.

Then, he and the Don went and took seats at a vacant table, in the back part of the room, where they could converse without being overheard.

The Don took time to light a cigar, before he opened the conversation.

"I suppose you are willing, by this time, to acknowledge that you are Simeon Slater," he began, "since denial is a waste of your breath?"

"I acknowledge nothin' o' the sort," was the gruff answer.

"Oh! well; it matters not. I am positive as to your identity. I have traced matters and so faithfully as to be sure of my man beyond peradventure.

"When I relate to you the story, you can but acknowledge that I speak facts.

"To begin: a number of years ago a poor young New Yorker came to the far West, but eventually drifted to the City of Mexico. His name was Leon McDonald. He had a fine education, which was his only valuable possession, aside from good looks and a robust constitution; he could speak several languages, and had plenty business tact, so that he was not long in the City of Mexico ere he obtained a lucrative position in a bank, the president of which was a Spanish gentleman of high caste and great wealth. He was a widower, and had but one child, then a beautiful creature, just budding into womanhood.

"That banker, Carlo Valeria, took a great fancy to his new clerk on account of his qualities of head and heart, and introduced him into his home.

"The result was as might have been expected. McDonald fell head over heels in love with charming Inez Valeria, and—well, there was a secret marriage.

"Carlo was a proud old aristocrat of Spain's bluest blood, and would never have listened to such a thing as a marriage between his child and a man of McDonald's plebeian birth, so it was never known to him.

"About a year after it took place, Carlo Valeria paid a farewell visit to Spain, for he was getting old and in poor health, and did not expect to survive long. It was during his protracted absence that Inez gave birth to a child.

"Here was a dilemma. What was to be done with it? It would not do to let the secret get to

her father's ears. Finally, it was decided to take it East and place it out to nurse until Carlo should die, when the parents could reclaim it.

"This was done by McDonald, who had amassed quite a little wealth. The child was placed in his own sister's care, and he returned to Mexico.

"Well, time flew by, and Carlo Valeria lived on. He had adopted me into his family, but, of course, I was to get no share of his fortune when he died. I was a Don in my own right, however, by inheritance of the title.

"At last, when little Mabel McDonald was seven years old, Carlo Valeria died, and Inez came into his grand fortune. In all these years Inez had never seen her child. Leon, however, had visited it each year.

"Carlo Valeria was scarcely cold in his grave when Leon, accompanied by myself, then a lad of twelve, started for the East to reclaim his child. The journey was unattended by incident, and we finally set out on our return to the City of Mexico. We came to New Orleans by boat, as McDonald wished to stop there; then we took a trip up the Mississippi river, to a point where we were to connect with rail to take us across the West to Santa Fe, at which point it was also McDonald's purpose to stop, before journeying south into Mexico.

"Well, it was on board the Mississippi steamboat that McDonald met you. You were a roustabout, but Leon found in you an acquaintance of former years, named Simeon Slater, and in confidence told you the story of his life—how he had secretly married, how little Mabel had been concealed, and how he was now taking her home to enjoy a princely fortune. Do you remember me now? I was present when he told that story!"

A strange tremor passed over the figure of old Jackpot; his face had grown very white, and his eyes burned with an unnatural fire.

"Go on!" he said, huskily.

"Well," the Don proceeded, "you were poor and hard-up, and so McDonald procured your release from service on the boat, fitted you out with a couple of suits of his own clothing, and gave you quite a sum of money—all out of pure friendship, born of your former acquaintance. What did you do in return?"

"The next morning it was found that little Mabel was missing, and so were you, and no one knew anything about either of you. It was a mystery, without a key of solution.

"The boat had not made a landing since both of you had last been seen, and yet, you were not on the boat, nor were you anywhere to be found.

"That was just about eleven years ago, now, Simeon Slater, and yet you have not changed materially, except you have grown older. Your face has always been indelibly engraved upon my memory, and I have always been confident I should find you, and it has finally come to pass.

"I will not dwell upon these eleven intervening years, for they have been marked only by one continuous agonizing search on the part of Leon McDonald and myself.

"The shock caused by the loss of her child, brought poor Inez to her grave within one short year, and the immense Valeria fortune fell to McDonald. After Inez's death we took the trail in dead earnest, and have never ceased to search—at least, I never have. When McDonald died, a year ago, he extorted from me an oath, that I would never give up the search as long as I lived, or until I found Mabel, and placed at her disposal the fortune that awaits her in Mexico. And, at last, the hour of my long-sought victory is at hand.

"Simeon Slater, I want that girl, or your life! Refuse me but the slightest, and I'll have both!"

Don Juan's tones were stern, almost to savageness.

Simeon Slater sat a moment, in blank silence, his burning gaze leveled at the floor; then he arose with a muttered malediction.

"The game's up, I suppose!" he said. "You shall have the girl!"

CHAPTER X.

ANOTHER SCHEME.

AFTER leaving the tent of Madame Samuels, the clairvoyant, George Sheldon sauntered through the mining-camp—back and forward, from one end to the other, several times. He looked neither to the right, nor to the left, but seemed absorbed in deep thought.

"Yes, this female detective *must* be got rid of," he mused, "or I shall be in peril. She may have lied to me after all, and may have a posse

of confederates lurking about the neighborhood, who are on the watch for an opportunity to seize me, and spirit me away into the hands of justice. Should I be captured and put on trial in Denver, the papers would get a hold on me, and there can be no doubt but what more desperate charges would leak out against me; so it is absolutely imperative that no time be lost in getting this Santa Fe Sal out of the way. But, how is it to be accomplished?"

Here was a question which the scheming mine-owner found it difficult to answer. Long he pondered over it, until, in his back and forth tramp he found himself close in the vicinity of the cabin of Hannah Hayes.

"A light was burning within, and he paused, a strange expression coming over his face.

"I wonder if it would work?" he muttered. "Women are weak, and easily influenced. The chances are that the devilish girl detective knows more than she lets on, and if so, she may seek to see the boy. Then—!"

He turned away, walked off a short distance, but then returned, and rapped upon the cabin door.

Hannah opened it more carefully, this time, than she had on the previous night.

"Is that you, Mr. Sheldon?"

"Yes, Hannah!" the mine-owner replied, as he stepped into the cabin. "Why, were you expecting other callers?"

"Oh! no. Only you know, there are so many miners drinking hard, of late, that it makes me somewhat timid."

"No one would think of harming you, Hannah! Where is the boy?"

"In his bed and fast asleep, long ago, sir."

"Ah! That is good! You will make a model lad out of him, Hannah, if we can only manage to keep him."

"Oh! sir, you do not think he is going to be taken away, do you?" Hannah asked, anxiously.

"Well, I couldn't say, for a certainty, but I have grave apprehensions that we may lose him."

"Oh! do not say so! It would break my heart to part with him, I love him so much. Pray explain, sir!"

"Well, you see, I have had a sort of foreboding, for several days past, that something was going to happen that would rob us of our pet, but I've tried to keep it off my mind as much as possible, and did not mention it to you, fearing to give you needless anxiety. But, at last, I have discovered that there is a female detective in the town, who calls herself Santa Fe Sal, and she is here for a purpose!"

"Oh! dear! dear!"

"What she is here for, no one knows," Sheldon went on, "for she is as sharp as a steel-trap, and close-mouthed, as far as her business is concerned. But, I am of the opinion that she is here for some errand connected with our *protege*."

"Perhaps to kidnap him?"

"Stranger things have occurred. Or, perhaps when she has all her plans ready, she will lay open claim to him. In case she should have good proofs to back her, we should have to give him up."

"Oh! that would be too bad, Mr. Sheldon!"

"Of course it would, Hannah, and I am not at all inclined to yield the boy up, so easily. Like yourself, I have become greatly attached to him, and shall use power, combined with strategy, to prevent losing the little one, whom I intend to eventually make my heir."

"Yes. Oh! I do so hope you can do something, Mr. Sheldon. I don't know what I should do, were I to lose Bertie."

"I think, Hannah, we can work it all right, if you will lend me a little assistance!"

"Oh! I will eagerly do all I can, sir."

"Very well. Now, you see, this girl or woman, Santa Fe Sal, has already proven herself a desperate character. She arrived here, last night, and, as perhaps you have heard, she had not been in the town half an hour, before she shot and killed John Hall, at the Jackpot Saloon!"

"Merciful stars! committed murder?"

"Just so. The charge stands against her, and if we can only catch the slippery sinner, there will be no danger of her taking little Bertie away from us, for she will get a dose of justice that will end her career of usefulness. See?"

"Yes. Go on."

"Well, you see, if, as I suspect, she is here with a view of getting possession of the boy, she is liable to call here, at almost any minute, to see him."

"Oh! dear. What shall I do? Shall I refuse to let her in?"

"By no means. Admit her, and receive her

in the most cordial manner you know how. If she asks to see the boy, show him to her, but take care she don't seize and make off with him. After she has seen him, invite her to have a cup of tea with you. Be particular to have tea ready at all hours, as there is no telling at what instant she may put in an appearance!"

"But, I cannot understand all this, Mr. Sheldon?"

"You will. Here is a vial of tasteless liquid. It is narcotic, in its effects. I take it, often, to produce sleep, when I'm restive. Pour the contents into a cup, and keep it there in readiness. When you receive a call from her, fill the cup with tea, and give it to her. Be sure not to get your cup and hers mixed. She will drink the tea, as the drug cannot be detected, either by smell, or by taste. If she sips but a couple of tablespoonfuls of the tea, it will quite soon deprive her of her senses."

"Oh! Mr. Sheldon, I could never do that. It would be murder!" Hannah cried, in astonishment and horror.

"Bosh! nonsense! There's no murder about it. The liquid won't kill a fly. All it does is to produce a stupor."

"But, after you get her drugged, you will have her lynched, and I will be responsible for her death?"

"No! I'll promise you, if you carry out my plan, no personal violence shall come to her. I will have her kept in confinement, until an oath can be exacted from her, that she will leave this country!"

"Oh! I am afraid to attempt such a thing, sir!"

"Bah! Nothing to be afraid of at all. I'll guarantee all will be just as I have outlined. Now, promise me to carry out my plan, and in the morning I'll hand you a reward of five hundred dollars, in solid cash!"

But, Hannah didn't promise, right away.

It took a great deal of urging and expostulating, on the part of the mine-owner, before he finally succeeded in getting her to promise that she would carry out his scheme, in case Santa Fe Sal should call.

The villain then took his departure, feeling certain that he had taken a sure step toward victory over his most dreaded enemy.

CHAPTER XI.

A VILLAIN'S TRAIL.

Simeon Slater, alias Old Jackpot, spoke so positively, when he said, "You shall have the girl," that Don Juan Carlos had no thought but what the arrant rascal meant it, and so bothered himself no more about the matter, for the time being, as he saw Slater resume his position behind the bar.

"At last, I've reached the end of my long trail, and I'm not sorry for it," was the Don's mental comment, as he lit a fresh cigar. "It was a lucky day when I fell in with Santa Fe Sal and her party, and now that I have got my game within reach, I'll wait and see how their case comes out. Were it not for Mr. Ball, I fancy I'd try to get into the better graces of the dashing girl detective, for she's after my liking. But, Ball has the inside track in her esteem, though I'm doubtful if he knows it. He is always so gloomy and sad that he makes a monotonous companion."

"There's a fire of vengeance burning within his veins, however, that will have to be quenched, before he is himself again. I know not his story, but his white hairs tell one—a tale of extreme mental anguish, or long suffering."

So busied was the Don, that he failed to take notice of Simeon Slater's leaving the saloon by a rear door.

The rascally Jackpot glided around to the front of the building, and there met a dark ruffianly looking fellow, whose ragged attire seemed to indicate that he was out of work, and down at the heel.

"Jack, you keep an eye on the back door, will you, and see that no one leaves the shebang by that way?" Slater inquired.

"Anything in it, boss?"

"Yes. You shall have what you want to drink, when I return."

"Kerect, boss. I'm your man!" and the fellow moved away toward the rear of the cabin.

As for Slater, he hurried off in the direction of George Sheldon's cabin.

"If I can find Sheldon in," he muttered, "I'll outwit the Spaniard, yet. The Mexican fortune belongs to the gal, and I've not been scheming all these years for nothing. Adele must marry Sheldon, and then, I'm a made man, for he dare not go back on me, and at the same time, he having control of the Mexican fortune, I can wring as much of it away from him as I choose."

When he reached the Sheldon cabin, he found it dark and gloomy, and after waiting in the neighborhood for half an hour, he retraced his steps to the saloon with a muttered curse.

Within the saloon, he found George Sheldon, in the act of treating the crowd.

"Come in here," Slater said, after the round was had and paid for. "I want to see you!"

Sheldon followed, evincing some surprise. When they were in the adjoining room, Slater locked the door, after them.

The only person in the room besides themselves was Adele, who sat at a table, engaged in sewing, and Rowdy Jack, who lay upon a settee still insensible.

Adele gave an apprehensive start, when she saw the mine-owner in company with her father, and set her lips tightly together.

She felt that their entrance boded no good to herself, and resolved to be as brave as possible.

"What's the matter with him?" the mine-owner demanded, pointing to Jack.

Slater briefly explained.

At which Sheldon uttered an oath.

"That accursed girl here again?" he ejaculated, "and allowed to escape? Ten thousand furies!"

"Yes, the boys let her escape, 'cause they was afraid to tackle her," Slater declared. "John Hall's fate learned them a lesson, I reckon. Then, too, that Pete Painter 'lowed et wa'n't fair fer a hull crowd o' men to pitch on to a single gal, an' you know what Pete says carries weight w' the crowd, every time."

"Confound him, I'll discharge him, the first thing in the morning! Now, what do you want of me?"

"Did you see that Spanish feller out yonder?"

"I did!"

"You've seen him before?"

"Yes. How do you know?"

"He told me he found you tryin' to force Adele into a promise to marry you!"

"He's an accursed liar!" the mine-owner cried, furious with rage, at being exposed.

"He told the truth, papa!" Adele spoke up, quickly. "George Sheldon did try to make me promise to marry him, and when I refused, he threatened to disgrace and ruin me, by scandalous reports!"

Simeon Slater pricked up his ears at this, and regarded the mine-owner, anything but good naturedly.

"Is this true?" he demanded.

"Waal, yes, it's true!" Sheldon replied, with a disagreeable leer. "What have you got to say about it?"

A flush of anger overspread Slater's face, showing that he still had a spirit, with some good in it, at least.

"I've got this much to say, George Sheldon!" he cried, folding his arms, and gazing steadily at the mine-owner—"that I thought you a more honorable man than to threaten such a cowardly revenge upon a pure and respectable girl. I brought you here, intending to try and arrange an immediate marriage between you two, but now, I will do nothing of the sort."

"You won't?"

"No, I won't!"

"Then, I suppose, that signifies enmity?"

"I am not particular. You know you stand in fear of me, while I do not fear you, in the least!"

"Bah! I'll make you fear me, you cur! More than that, allow me to inform you that I would not lower and demean my social station by marrying a pauper's daughter!"

"And, allow me to inform you, sir, that Adele is no pauper's daughter, nor is she my daughter, but the daughter of wealth, and good standing, and to-day, there awaits her, in the city of Mexico, a fortune of colossal proportions, left her by the death of her father and mother. So, you see, sir, what you have lost!"

"Curses seize you! Why did you never tell me this before, you hound?" George Sheldon cried, fiercely. "I've a mind to choke the life out of you!"

He sprang upon the keeper of the Jackpot Saloon, and seized him by the throat.

Adele uttered a terrified shriek, and simultaneously Rowdy Jack sprang from the sofa, and was seen mingling with the struggling pair.

Then, there was another shriek, and all three went crashing to the floor.

George Sheldon quickly regained his feet, and burst open the door into the bar-room.

"Quick! help this way!" he cried. "Secure Rowdy Jack! He has knifed Old Jackpot!"

A crowd of miners instantly surged forward into the room, where, lying upon the floor in

the throes of death, lay Simeon Slater, a dirk-knife thrust to the hilt in his bosom.

Rowdy Jack had just extricated himself from under the dying saloon keeper, and gained his feet, when the crowd rushed into the room.

"Seize him! seize him!" cried the mine-owner. "Do not let the murderer escape!"

The men rushed bodily upon Jack, and as he had but one hand to fight them, he of course had no show of defending himself, and was made a prisoner in a jiffy.

"I didn't stab the saloon-keeper," he protested, while being bound. "It was George Sheldon who did it. He and Jackpot got into a quarrel, an' I sprung up and tried to separate them. Sheldon knifed Jackpot, and then we all went down together. Sheldon got up first and charged the stabbin' to me. I swear to God I had nothin' to do w' it!"

"Bah! yer kan't work off no sech a tale on us!" cried a miner, who had no love for the gambler, from the fact that Jack had frequently relieved him of sums of money at poker. "We all know what sort of a hair-pin you aire, Rowdy Jack! You an' Old Jackpot didn't love each other over-much. All that Jackpot keered fer you was what money you fetched to his bar, an' you'd 'a' salivated him long ago, but for a hope ye might git his gal. So et's a clear case ag'in' ye!"

"To be sure it is," broke in George Sheldon.

"Why, I saw the rascal draw the knife from his hip-pocket, gentlemen. He aimed a blow at me first, but fell short of his mark, and then he watched his chance and drove the blade into Jackpot's breast."

"Jackpot is dead!" at this juncture announced one of the miners who had been kneeling beside the wounded saloon-keeper.

There was a scream at this, and Adele sunk back upon the floor in a swoon.

"Out with the murderer and string him up!" yelled George Sheldon. "Don't give the cuss a show at all. He's cheated every mother's son of you at cards, but don't give him another chance to do it."

This order was hailed with wild yells of approval, and Rowdy Jack was dragged from the saloon, followed by the whole yelling mob with one exception.

George Sheldon remained behind.

As soon as the crowd had cleared from the kitchen, where the tragedy had taken place, he closed and barred the door communicating with the bar-room.

"Jackpot is dead!" he hissed, as he gazed down at the murdered man, whose features were becoming cold and rigid; "and those lips will never speak what they knew and would have uttered but for the knife-thrust. Rowdy Jack too will be in Kingdom Come inside of ten minutes, and his tongue will be silenced. Verily luck has not deserted me yet. And, now—"

He knelt beside the corpse of Simeon Slater, and made a hurried examination of his pockets.

Finally from an inner pocket of his vest, he drew forth a crumpled document.

Bearing it to the light, he gave it a hasty examination, and a cry of exultation burst from his lips, as he finished the perusal.

"Jackpot did not lie to me!" he muttered. "This tells all about the girl, and she is mine now—my prize! Now is my time to secure her, while the crowd are stringing up Rowdy Jack!"

He flung open the rear door of the cabin, and peered out. A mellow flood of moonlight fell over the camp, and he could see distinctly.

There was no one in sight in that vicinity.

Turning, he approached where Adele was lying.

He drew a vial of liquid from his pocket, similar to that he had given Hannah Hayes.

Kneeling beside the prostrate girl, he poured a few drops of the liquid between her parted lips.

Then, restoring the bottle to his pocket, he raised her in his arms and bore her from the cabin.

Thence he worked along the mountain-side, keeping other cabins as a shield between him and the crowd, whose yells he could hear, near the front of the Jackpot Saloon.

"I know of a place to hide her," he muttered, with an evil chuckle, "where all the men of Buckshot Camp cannot find her, and there she shall stay, till she consents to marry me. Then I'll lose no time in closing up my matters here, and hieing myself to the City of Mexico, where I can laugh at detectives and the law! Ha! ha! I fancy your lucky star is still in the ascendant, George Sheldon!"

And the villain laughed a laugh of triumph.

CHAPTER XII.

ROWDY JACK'S CONFESSION.

THE crowd which dragged Rowdy Jack from the saloon, making the night hideous with their discordant yells and screeches, was not one to show much mercy, and well he knew it.

He had never been particularly noted for playing a square game, and most of the miners had been bled by him, time and again, of all their hard-earned cash; hence, where they had heretofore stood in fear of him, they now saw a chance to get even with him, and did not mean to let it pass unimproved.

Pete Painter was one of the leaders of the mob.

Merciful in some instances, there was no pity in his heart for Rowdy Jack, whom he knew to be a black-hearted ruffian and villain.

Jack had robbed the burly miner of over two thousand dollars, when he first struck the camp, and Painter had never forgotten the loss.

A short distance from the Jackpot Saloon was a large tree, with strong limbs branching straight out from the trunk, and a better place for a lynching-bee could not be found in all the camp.

So to this tree Rowdy Jack was marched.

Several of the men had brought along lighted torches, but they were scarcely needed, for the soaring moon sent down a flood of illumination that fairly put the light of the torches to shame.

The same lasso that had been prepared for use on Santa Fe Sal, the previous night, was now called into requisition and the noose was shirred about Rowdy Jack's neck.

The other end was then tossed over the stout limb, and seized by a dozen pairs of willing hands, eager to launch the gambler into eternity.

"Gentlemen, I am innocent of killing Old Jackpot!" Rowdy Jack cried, in ringing tones, "but I know you will not believe me. I do not fear to die. I have lived a bold, fearless life, and so will I die. But, I beg of you, let me speak a few words, before you yank me up. It's the last favor ye kin ever do me, and I feel sure you'll grant it!"

The jabbering of the mob ceased, and the men remained in grim silence, all except Pete Painter.

"Go ahead!" he said gruffly. "I ain't ther man as would deprive a dog of et's last bark. But be mighty brief in your remarks. We ain't got no time to monkey 'bout this matter."

"It won't take me long to say my say!" Rowdy Jack declared, "an' I'll not keep ye out o' yer fun any longer than I kin help. I know ye'r anxious to see me kickin' at space, and believe me, I appreciate your taste."

"Come! come! No superfluous remarks!" growled Pete Painter.

"Kerect! What I've got to say, is this: I didn't stab Old Jackpot. I swear to that before that God into whose presence I expect to be summoned on the judgment day. I've been a hardened wretch for years, but I didn't knife Jackpot. It was George Sheldon who did et. I never owned a dirk-knife. Mine's a bowie."

"I was lyn' on the lounge when Sheldon and Jackpot entered the room. I let on to be insensible yet, but I wasn't. I wanted to hear what they had to say."

"Well, they went to talkin', and finally 'Pot he accused Sheldon of threatening to ruin Adele's reputation by circulating bad stories. Sheldon didn't deny it, but asked 'Pot what he had to say about it. One word brought on another."

"Finally Jackpot told Sheldon he couldn't have Adele. Sheldon said he wouldn't have a pauper's gal. Jackpot got mad then, and sed Adele wasn't his child, but the heiress to an immense fortune in the City o' Mexico."

"Then Sheldon caught Jackpot by the throat, an' began to choke him. I sprung off the lounge an' tried to separate them, one-handed as I was. We struggled a moment; then I saw Sheldon draw the dirk, and stab Jackpot. The next instant we tripped and all went down together. Sheldon got up first, and rushed out an' charged me with the murder he had committed himself!"

Here Rowdy Jack paused.

He looked from face to face.

Every visage wore a grim, merciless expression.

On not a single face was there a look that indicated that his story was believed.

There was plainly no sympathy for him.

"Are you done?" Pete Painter demanded, gruffly.

"No;—only a few more words. That little boy, at Hannah Hayes's cabin is George Sheldon's grandson. The boy's father, Sheldon's only son, is in an Eastern prison, where

Sheldon caused him to be put. Sheldon then eloped with his son's wife, and came West. But, he soon tired of her, and cast her off, after robbing her of her money. Bent on vengeance, she gave chase. Sheldon found she was coming here, and gave Jackpot and myself big money to intercept and murder her. He accompanied us, to see that we did the work up right. Jackpot and I both fired at her, as she an' the kid were ridin' through a gulch on horseback, but missed our mark, and I've never been sorry for it, you bet!

"Sheldon then snatched the rifle from my hand, and sent the fatal bullet crashing through her brain. He and Jackpot then returned here. I remained behind, and gave the woman a decent burial. A couple of nights later, I fetched the kid to camp, and left it where it was found. That's all. If any one ever comes in search of the kid, tell 'em what I've told you, for it's God's honest truth."

"So, now, go ahead—the quicker the better!"

There was an instant of blank silence—then, clear and stern, rung out the cry, from the lips of Pete Painter:

"Heave, oh, heave!"

Simultaneous with the cry, the miners laid back on the rope, and the body of Rowdy Jack hung suspended in mid-air, by the neck.

At the same instant, there was a wild cry, the clatter of a horse's hoofs, the rapid reports of a revolver, and, at a furious speed, a horse and rider were seen bearing down upon the scene, a stream of fire, literally, pouring from the rider's leveled weapon.

Involuntarily the mob fell back, and, like a flash, horse and rider passed through the lane thus formed.

So sudden was the rush, that it was some seconds before the crowd could comprehend what had happened.

Then they discovered that the lasso which had suspended Rowdy Jack, had been cut, and the victim of lynch law was gone!

While, lying flat upon their backs, were the men who had held the other end of the rope.

And away, down the mountain-side, the clatter of a horse's hoofs were dying out, in the distance.

CHAPTER XIII.

WEAVING THE NET.

ON leaving Jackpot Saloon, after having been undisguised by Rowdy Jack, Santa Fe Sal lurked about the camp, for a few minutes, and then left it, and walked rapidly along the mountain-side, until she came to a small wooded bench, or level space, where the tall gaunt trees formed somber aisles, across which the moonlight played in golden bars.

Following one of the aisles, she soon came to where a horse was tied—a clean-limbed, fine-looking animal, handsomely equipped.

The horse gave a neigh of recognition, as the girl detective approached, and she patted him affectionately on the neck.

"Don't get impatient, Juno," she said, "for there's no telling yet, what this night may bring forth."

She then seated herself on a rock over which the moonlight played, from down through the tree-tops, and burying her face in her hands, gave herself up to reflection.

What her thoughts were, is not for us to say, but she was so deeply engrossed that she did not hear the approach of a man, who paused beside her, and touched her on the shoulder—the same white-haired individual, whom the reader has previously met, in the chasm camp.

Santa Fe Sal looked up, with a start.

"Why, is it you, Mr. Ball?" she ejaculated.

"How you startled me. I must be getting deaf, not to have heard your approach."

"No, it is not Mr. Ball!" he said, taking a seat beside her, "for, henceforth, I am Robert Sheldon, the Avenger! Have you been to the town, lately?"

"I just came from there, sir."

"Ah! What luck?"

"None, in particular. I went there in disguise, but it was torn from my face. I managed to escape, through the opportune entrance of Don Juan, who put a bullet through the wrist of the man who was goin' to salivate me."

"Then, you have gained no actual proofs?"

"None. But, I've made up my mind as to the man who can furnish them."

"Who is he?"

"The man who attempted to shoot me—Rowdy Jack. I am going to try and steal him, anyhow. But, betwixt you and Mr. Sheldon, I don't opine I shall wait any longer, on account of proofs. You are satisfied that your former wife is dead, and that your

father, George Sheldon, killed her, or caused her to be killed. Am I not right?"

"You are!" Robert Sheldon replied.

"So am I. And, now, what is the use of waiting any longer? The sooner we nab the old sinner, and run him off, the better."

"I agree with you!" and a sterner expression came upon Robert Sheldon's face. "I have made up my mind to one thing, Sally, and once my mind is made up, it cannot be changed."

"Well?"

"I've made up my mind that my wretched parent shall never be taken before the courts. Justice, in those places, is but a mockery, at best. When we get him, he shall hear the story of his sinful career, and then, we will fight to the death, and may the best man win!"

The wronged son spoke both fiercely and resolutely, and it was evident that his hatred for George Sheldon was entire and relentless.

"Well, of course, you know your own business!" Santa Fe Sal observed, "and I have no say in it. But, supposing the old man should do you up? What would become o' yer little son?"

"That's mainly what brought me to hunt you up. I am strangely impressed that the hour is close at hand, when George Sheldon and I shall stand face to face. Then, we must come to a final settlement. It is true, I may fall, but I am in hopes not. In case I should, my child will be without a relative. The woman who has him in charge, now, might bring him up all right, but I do not want her to have him. I want you to take him, Sally, and be as a mother to him!"

"I, Mr. Sheldon?"

"Yes, you. I could trust him with you, Sally. You are the only one I could bear to leave him with."

"Why, sir, I am very much surprised. I should be the last person in the world you ought to think of placing him with. You know my profession, and its perils, and constant changing activity. Indeed, sir, I could not think of dragging a mere child into such a life as mine."

"All because you do not understand me. Listen, and I will explain. I was not a poor man when sent to prison. I had been economical, and had a private bank account, which speculation had swelled to a number of thousand dollars considerably exceeding ten. Of this, neither my father nor wife were cognizant. After I was pardoned, by a bold investment in stocks, I cleared a little fortune in less than a week, so that I am now, quite rich."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. Now, after you finish this case, which you have hunted up so faithfully, I want you to leave off your profession, altogether—this, no matter whether I am dead or alive."

"Why, you surprise me, sir!"

"You must not be surprised. This is no life for one to lead who is so beautiful and accomplished as yourself. If I live, we will take little Bertie and go to my home in the East, where your sole business will be to act as his governess. If I am killed, you will find all my money, composed of large notes, concealed about my person. Take it, get possession of my child, and settle down and be a mother to him. You will have enough means to keep you comfortably as long as you live. Now, Sally, promise me you will do this?"

"Mr. Sheldon, I do not know how to answer you. I had never thought of giving up my profession; and your offer surprises me. You do not know me, except by my connection with your case. I am not a proper person to assume the care of your son, were I inclined to accept your kind offer."

"Nay! do not say that. You think I do not know of your past, and how you were wronged, but I do. I inquired into that before I engaged your services. Let that page of the past be unread, for you were not to blame. I, too, have suffered, but when I am through with this matter I mean once more to look upon the bright side of life. That is what you should do. It is not probable that I shall ever marry again, but if I should conclude to, and we found ourselves of the same turn of mind, I am satisfied I should not care to look further than for you as my choice. So promise me, whatever the result of my meeting with my father may be, that you will carry out the wishes I have expressed."

He spoke earnestly and kindly, but not passionately, yearningly, as a lover might have spoken.

He evidently had weighed his words well, before uttering them, and said nothing but what he meant.

He had scarcely glanced at her while speaking, but had kept his gaze riveted upon the ground.

Santa Fe Sal had heard him, the glow deepening on her cheeks, the light of joy increasing in her eyes.

"I—I am very much surprised, Mr. Sheldon," she said, after a brief silence; "but none the less grateful for the kindly interest you seem to take in me. I beg, however, that you will give me a little time in which to consider. There is no probability that you and your wicked father will meet to-night, and to-morrow I will give you an answer."

"Thank you," he said, raising one of her hands to his lips. "I will hope your answer will be favorable. And now, as to your plans. Have you any?"

"I hardly know, myself, more than that I shall try to capture George Sheldon to-morrow night, and get him away from Buckshot Camp."

"Then you will want the assistance of the outlaws Bokus promised to get?"

"Yes, but not to make a raid. I simply want them to cover our escape from Buckshot. Do you still have faith in Bokus, sir?"

"I do."

"Then I want you to go back to camp, and send him at once for this Captain Clymer and his gang. This grove is a good covert. I want the men here by dusk to-morrow night, here to wait until you receive orders from me. Do you understand?"

"I do."

"Very well. If my luck does not fail me, you will here have a chance to see your parent, and your child to-morrow night."

"Have you seen my child yet?"

"I have not, but that does not matter. When I want him, bet high on it that I will get him!"

"Is your partner—Alvin—in the mining-camp?"

Santa Fe Sal smiled.

"Yes, Alvin is there, but I haven't had a chance to have a word with him yet. Alvin is slow, but he is generally sure to score a point or two in a game."

"And the Don? How is his case coming on?"

"I don't know, but I reckon the girl he rescued on the mountain is the game he is trapping for. I mean to find out to-night. I think I will be moving back toward the camp now, and you had better get back to the chasm, and send Bokus off after the reinforcements. If possible, all hands are to be here by dusk to-morrow night, but exceeding care must be taken to prevent discovery."

"I will look out for that."

They shook hands and separated, Robert Sheldon going in the direction of the abyss camp; and Santa Fe Sal, mounting her horse, rode cautiously toward Buckshot.

"Such a strange proposition—that of Mr. Sheldon's," she mentally soliloquized. "I wonder if I ought to take advantage of it, and give up this wild, roving existence? He is a true gentleman, and offers me a home, and—maybe—"

The color came faster into her cheeks, and her eyes glowed bright as the stars that twinkled in the blue dome above, across whose broad expanse gradually soared the midsummer moon.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MADAME ENLISTS.

GEORGE SHELDON bore the insensible form of Adele rapidly along the mountain-side, his course slightly descending below the level of the town.

Although she weighed considerably over a hundred pounds, the arch-schemer appeared not to mind her weight, but carried her along as though she were a doll-baby.

He had got well beyond the outskirts of the camp when he heard a number of pistol-shots in rapid succession.

"I wonder what can be the matter now?" he muttered. "Just as like as not those bungling hounds back there have let Rowdy Jack escape. If they have, I'm cursed if I won't blow some one's brains out!"

The reports soon ceased, and were followed by wild yells.

Still the mine-owner hurried on, his visago set and hard of expression.

In the course of half an hour he reached a small opening, or rather a long, upright seam in the rocky mountain-side, about two feet in width, and partly screened from casual observation by growths of bushes.

Shifting Adele so that she partly rested over his shoulder, he entered this fissure.

Then he advanced slowly for about twenty feet, when he paused, and deposited his burden upon the hard, rocky bottom.

Next he struck a match on the heel of his boot, and ignited a pile of resinous fagots and knots near at hand.

A strong blaze soon leaped upward, giving forth a bright illumination, that showed the place to be a cave of considerable size—probably ten feet wide by fifteen long and fifteen high.

The smoke escaped through a crevice in the rock ceiling. There seeming to be a draught at this point.

The cave had no furniture whatever.

At one side was a large flat stone, which, although not a part of the cave rock, had the appearance of being so.

After taking a survey of the place, George Sheldon once more partly raised Adele, and laid her in a more comfortable position, with her head pillowed upon her right arm.

"There! I'll guarantee she'll sleep there until morning, what with fainting and the effects of the drug!" he said. "I'll be back here before that, or send some one to act as her jailer. I wonder if the boodle is all right?"

He went to the flat stone, and by an extraordinary tug, pulled it to one side, revealing a cavity about two feet square.

This cavity was nearly filled with buckskin pouches, and packages done up in yellow paper, and the mine-owner's eyes glistened when he gazed down at them.

"Ha! ha! this is my bank, and I'm both president and cashier!" he chuckled. "All assets and no liabilities in this case. Cash capital, a quarter of a million. Ha! ha! You're not a poor man, George Sheldon, but you'll be a richer one, when you get hold of that Mexican fortune!"

He then shoved the stone back, over the cavity.

"I'll return to town now!" he muttered, "and I fancy I know the party to keep guard over this girl, if she is paid a fat price. Money is what makes the mare go nowadays!"

Before leaving the cave, he poured a few more drops of the drug into Adele's mouth, to assure against her awakening, before his return.

He then hastened back to Buckshot, to find the camp in a high fever of excitement, over the rescue of Rowdy Jack by Santa Fe Sal, for several of the riders had recognized the wild rider as being the fearless and dashing girl detective of the Southwest.

One of the miners, also, took Sheldon to one side, and narrated to him the concession Rowdy Jack had made, before being strung up.

This man's name was Big Bloomer—at least that was the name he went by in Buckshot—and he was envious of Pete Painter—a rival as it were, for prestige among the miners. Some there were who looked up to him as a sort of leader; but Painter undoubtedly had the lion's share of popularity as far as the two men were concerned.

"I tell you what it is, boss," Bloomer said in conclusion, "Jack's charges have lost you a heap of popularity with some of the boys, and I've sounded 'em all, and find out a good many of 'em don't think so well of you, as they used to. There's Pete Painter's crew—I've heard some broad hints thrown out by them that the matter ought to be investigated; but the boys as follows me, they allus goes as I do."

George Sheldon smothered a curse.

This bit of news gave him no little uneasiness. "So you think some of the boys are inclined to turn on me, eh?" he said, grating his teeth.

"I wouldn't be surprised, sir."

"Curse them! Look here, Bloomer, I've always found you a close-mouthed fellow, where your own interests were concerned."

"Waal, I should smile, boss. I ain't no blab-snoot, nor never was, nor I ain't no fool—you can bet the Big Bear mine on that!"

"Exactly. Now, in regard to Rowdy Jack's story, some parts of it might prove to be true, and some might not. Again, when the thing gets noised around, detectives may make an attempt to yank me out of the town. Don't you see?"

"On course I do."

"And, in case such an attempt be made, then is the time Painter and his gang would be most likely to go against me. Eh?"

"You're a-shoutin', boss."

"Now, I don't intend to ever be taken out of Buckshot, if I have to fight till blood runs down the mountain-side."

"Bully fer you! Bully fer you!"

"Are you with me, Bloomer?"

"Tooth, temper an' toe-nail, boss."

"Good. You will never have cause to regret it. If it comes to war, and we win, I'll make you boss foreman of the mine. Now, then, how many of the boys are there, who regularly follow you?"

"I can count on twenty-five."

"Not enough, by a quarter. Now, look here, Bloomer. See how many men you can get to stand up for me and fight for me in case of trouble. Understand?"

"Yes."

"I'll pay every man who can be relied on, twenty-five dollars—the more, the better."

"Kereet."

"And for every man you get over, I'll give you, individually, ten dollars."

"It's a bargain."

"Very well. Now, don't be hasty, but go careful. Work it up on the quiet, by all means, and if possible don't let Painter get the cue."

"Depend on et, I'll fix it, boss. There's a lot o' the boys wants money bad, and they'll bite. If I get fifty men?"

"All the better. You get fifty men you can rely on, and I'll give you a hundred dollars beside your commission."

They then separated, Sheldon going toward his cabin.

"The devil's to pay, now!" he gritted. "Why in thunder didn't I put Rowdy Jack out of the way before he got an opportunity to open his mouth? Curse him! This is liable to make me a heap of trouble. This matter of Painter and his gang turning against me, is bad, too, for when they discover that Adele is missing, they will naturally lay her disappearance to me. If Hannah only gets the girl, Santa Fe Sal, I'll take care she never does any one any harm again. This is a desperate case, and only desperate remedies are to be used, now."

He remained at the cabin, until most of the crowd had gone into the Jackpot, then he made a careful approach to Madame Samuel's tent.

A light was burning inside, and he entered without ceremony.

"Good-evening," the madame said, in a soft, oily voice. "What can I do for you to-night, Mr. Sheldon?"

"How do you know my name?"

"You were pointed out to me."

"Do you know where I live?"

"I do."

The mine-owner hesitated a moment.

"It won't pay me to spare money at this stage of the game!" he reasoned, so, aloud, he said:

"How is business?"

"Very poor."

"Town is no good, eh?"

"No."

"Suppose you will leave soon?"

"I expect to."

"Where for?"

"I have no place in view."

"How would you like to stay here?"

"What to do?"

"Guard a woman, who is to be kept hidden for a few days, to carry out a plan."

"I am not particular what I do, sir, as long as it fetches money."

"Then, I've a job for you. The price is one thousand dollars, for not more than ten days."

"Count me engaged, then. That suits me!"

"Very well. You can be relied upon!"

"Perfectly!"

"Enough said! Rap at my cabin door, one hour from now, and be ready for bizness!"

"I will be there, sir!"

Bowing, Sheldon withdrew from the tent.

"So far, good!" he chuckled. "If things work this way, I'll win my game, yet!"

CHAPTER XV.

A LETTER FROM THE DEAD.

THE miners who had claimed that it was Santa Fe Sal who had rescued Rowdy Jack from a certain death, had not been mistaken; it was the daring girl detective, who rode like a lightning flash down through the camp, caught the swaying body of the gambler, in her arms, and at the same time cut the lariat by which he was suspended—then dashed on, before the astonished Regulators could raise a hand or voice to check her.

Straight out of the camp, and then slantwise down the mountain-side she rode, holding Rowdy Jack across the saddle-bow, in front of her. For half a mile she proceeded thus, then, abruptly headed her steed back up the mountain, again, finally reaching the wooded bench, where she and Robert Sheldon had consulted, a few hours previous.

Within one of the moonlit aisles, she drew rein, and dropped the form of Rowdy Jack to the ground, after which she dismounted, herself.

Jack had returned to his senses, but being bound, hand and foot, was of course helpless.

She dragged him to a tree, and leaned him up against it, in a sitting position, so that the moonlight streamed down through an opening in the tree-tops, full upon him.

He recognized her, as she stood before him, but did not offer to speak, until spoken to.

"Well, sir, how do you feel by this time?" Santa Fe Sal demanded, surveying him keenly.

"I feel that my chances for life are somewhat better than they were a few minutes ago," he replied, with a shrug of his shoulders. "I thought it was all up with me, then."

"Don't be too sure but what it is now!" Sal said, in a way that implied a threat. "It's a pretty certain fact that you deserve a fate worse than lynching."

"Maybe I do," was the answer. "I know my past record ain't as clear as it might be. But I didn't knife old Jackpot."

"I am satisfied of that. It was George Sheldon who did that."

"You are right. I'm a purty hard cuss, young woman, an' mebbe it would 'a' been the best thing if you had let 'em lynched me. But, bad as I've been, I argue that Sheldon knocks me clean out o' time fer downright meanness and villainy."

"Probably you are right. Do you know, Rowdy Jack, who and what I am?"

"I allowed, the first I saw of you, that you were a detective."

"I am."

"And you're after me?"

"Not in particular, although, according to the story you told at the lynching-tree, I should arrest you."

"Did you overhear what I said?"

"I did, and made up my mind to rescue you, and see if I could use you."

"In what way?"

"As evidence against George Sheldon."

Rowdy Jack's eye sparkled vengefully.

"You can bet I'll give him away, now," he gritted, "after his cowardly attempt to get rid of me and Old Jackpot."

"Do you swear that what you told the crowd is true?"

"I do! As God is my witness, I uttered the truth, and nothing but the truth."

"It was George Sheldon who killed Florence, his son's wife?"

"It was."

"Did you ever see George Sheldon's son?"

"No."

"Where did you meet George Sheldon first?"

"In Buckshot. We got acquainted at the card-table. I and Jackpot got acquainted with him about the same time."

"Sheldon hired you and Jackpot to intercept and kill Florence Sheldon?"

"He did."

"How did he come to do this?"

"I guess he sized us up, as bein' on the make. Anyhow, he pumped away at us until he found we weren't particular what we did, so long as we got the pay for it. Then he come out and told us what he wanted done, and we made a bargain. We pumped him too, until we got his confidence, and he gave us the story as I told it to night."

"What terms did you make with him?"

"Oh! we bled him, and don't you forget it! First we told him we would do the job for five hundred, cash down. He came to time, an' afterward we told him we'd made up our mind we couldn't do the job short o' five thousand apiece. He kicked like a steer, at first, but it wasn't no use. When we told him we'd give him dead away if he didn't come to time, he planked down the cash."

"Then you set out to commit the crime?"

"Yes."

"He accompanied you?"

"Yes. He's afraid we'd play him for a sucker."

"Where did you find Florence Sheldon?"

"About fifteen miles south of Buckshot."

"You told the crowd that you and Jackpot both fired at her?"

"We did. She was coming up the gulch. We three were crouching in the bushes, near the trail. Sheldon ordered us to fire, an' we let drive. Our bullets went wide of the mark, however."

"Then—"

"The young woman put spurs to her horse, and tried to ride past us, an' get around a bend in the gulch. Sheldon got mad, snatched my

rifle away from me, and fired, hitting the woman plum in the forehead, and killing her instantly."

"Well?"

"Sheldon ordered me to bury the woman, an' fetch the kid to Buckshot in the dead o' night, and drop it. Then he an' Jackpot started back for Buckshot."

"You buried the woman?"

"Yes. I fixed her away in the best shape I could, for I felt mighty guilty, tho' I didn't harm a hair of her head."

"How is it the child has not recognized either of you three in connection with the murder?"

"We were all masked. Then the kid was too young to talk then?"

"How is it that Sheldon has supported the child?"

"Dunno, unless he got tackled by remorse, and felt in duty bound to do it."

Santa Fe Sal paced to and fro for several minutes, in meditation. Finally she paused, and asked:

"Did you search the clothing of Florence Sheldon before you buried her?"

"I did."

"What did you find?"

"Nothing but a paper and a few cents in money."

"What was the paper?"

"A confession."

"Ah! What did you do with it?"

Rowdy Jack hesitated a moment.

"Supposing I tell you—will you set me free?" he asked.

"You shall be set at liberty as soon as I can arrange to confront George Sheldon, and charge him with the murder," Santa Fe Sal replied. "Until then I shall hold you a prisoner!"

"Yes, and after you get all out of me you can, shoot me?"

"By no means. When I give my word, it is law."

Jack eyed her a moment, as if in doubt about her keeping her word.

Finally he said:

"Very well. You have given me your word, and I will trust you. In the inside pocket of my vest you will find the document."

Santa Fe Sal at once proceeded to unbutton his vest, and in a moment had possession of the coveted document.

She unfolded it eagerly, and holding it in the moonlight, read it carefully over.

It was written in a neat style of chirography, and ran as follows, having neither date nor place of writing attached:

"Oh! God, I wish I were dead, and but for my poor innocent child, I would not hesitate a moment to kill myself."

"Mine is a lost and ruined life, and I have naught to live for, except to protect little Bertie, and for vengeance—ay! bitter vengeance."

"Perhaps I may never live to get this vengeance, and so I will leave this behind, as a warning to others not to do as I have done."

"When I married Robert Sheldon, I was a belle of Chicago's fashionable society, and worth a hundred thousand dollars in cash. Robert was a promising business man, and I loved him. After we were married, however, he would not go into society, and I felt constrained to stay at home, too, although it caused me many a sad and lonely hour, and shut out much of the happiness I had previously known."

"Finally came that awful shock. Robert was arrested for forgery, and sent to prison for ten years."

"I had come of one of the first families, and will acknowledge that I was both proud and vain, and when the disgrace of my husband's crime became publicly known, I felt that I could not live through the mortification and shame. Oh! it was terrible. I could not go out, except everybody stared at me, and I fancied I could hear them say—'There goes the wife of Robert Sheldon, the forger!'"

"Mother came to me, and coaxed me to go home, but when I went father turned me and my boy out of doors, saying I should not inflict my disgrace on him. I tried to kill myself and child, then, but was prevented, and then—then came to me that demon in human guise, George Sheldon, my husband's father."

"With his oily tongue, he essayed to make me hate my husband, and I thought I did. My shame over the disgrace was so great, that I grew reckless, and when George Sheldon put the devil into my head, I was too weak to battle with him, and oh! God, gave up my life and hope, forever."

"He promised to arrange a quiet divorce, if I would afterward marry and elope with him. I consented. I knew nothing of law, and fell a willing victim to his villainy."

"The so-called divorce was granted, and we were married, and left Chicago for the West. A few short weeks—then, I knew I hated the wretch, and loved only my poor imprisoned husband, but alas! it was then too late to turn back. I had stepped into the treacherous quicksand of shame and disgrace, and there was no way of retreat."

"Then, I saw that he was tiring of me, and I was not sorry. If I could only die—that was all I asked, and prayed for. But death would not come, and I

was by this time too much of a coward to take my own miserable life."

"At last came the worst of all. I awoke one morning, to find him gone, and with him, all my money except a couple of hundred dollars I happened to have in a locket. The wretch left behind him a statement that the divorce was a sham, and that I was guilty of bigamy, and if I attempted to follow him, he would have me put in jail for that crime."

"Oh! the monster, how I hate him! and how I yearn to find him, and kill him! He has ruined my life and all hopes of happiness forever, but I will have revenge. Poor Robert! What must be his opinion of me. He would never forgive me, were I to wander back. Perhaps, however, I may meet him, on the day of judgment, and he will know how sincerely penitent I am. May God guide me onward—onward to vengeance."

"FLORENCE SHELDON."

There was a perceptible moisture in the eyes of Santa Fe Sal, as she folded the paper, and placed it in her pocket.

"Poor wronged, misguided creature!" she murmured. "She never lived to get her vengeance, but her sorrow-stricken husband will take it in her stead!"

Aloud, she said, addressing Rowdy Jack:

"I have no time to tarry longer here. I have work to do yet before I sleep, and so I will tie you to the tree, and be off."

"For the love of God do not leave me here, and defenseless. Some one will come along and murder me!" Jack cried, piteously.

"Bah! no one will visit this grove, unless it is Robert Sheldon and party, and I will leave a note pinned to your vest, so that they shall not harm you until I return."

She procured a lariat from her saddle-bag, and bound him securely to the tree in a sitting position, after which she wrote a note and pinned it upon his vest.

Then, lariatting out her horse, near at hand, she set out on foot, on her return to Buckshot Camp.

"Now, there is one course more to pursue. The child of Florence and Robert Sheldon must be put beyond the reach of the murderous wretch who has ruined so much happiness. He is so great a villain that, did he think his chances of escape were slim, he would murder the child out of spite. Yes, I'll have the boy, or know the reason why. And, as for you, George Sheldon, your coil of rope has unwound nearly to the end!"

CHAPTER XVI.

SANTA FE SAL GOES DOWN.

It did not take long for Santa Fe Sal to reach the outskirts of the mining-camp, and by skulking about, she was soon able to ascertain that the place had resumed a state of quiet.

Many cabins were dark, showing that the occupants had retired for the night.

A light still shone from the window of the Jackpot Saloon, but there were no particular sounds of revelry within.

There was not a person abroad, as far as the girl detective could ascertain, though the hour was not yet midnight.

After making the reconnaissance, Santa Fe Sal glided toward the cabin of Hannah Hayes.

"I wonder if I will find the old gal up?" she soliloquized. "Tain't likely, but she'll get up, all the same, or I'll climb to the roof and do the Santa Claus act of going down the chimney."

When she arrived at the cabin, she found that a ray of light shone out through the crack in under the door, which seemed to indicate that the widow had not retired for the night.

After listening at the door a moment, Santa Fe Sal rapped gently upon it.

Directly footsteps were heard within, the door was unbarred and opened, and a flood of light streamed out.

"What's wanted?" Hannah Hayes demanded, from the threshold.

"Are you Mrs. Hayes?" Sally asked quietly.

"I am. Will you step in?"

The girl detective entered.

Hannah closed the door, and then handed her guest a seat, surveying her with curiosity.

"Yes, I am Mrs. Hayes," she continued, "and you are also a woman, if I mistake not, despite your masculine attire."

"Oh! yes," was the reply. "I'm Santa Fe Sal, the Slasher, right up from New Mex. Guess you never see'd a gal in man's togs, before, eh?"

"No, indeed. I should think you would be ashamed to dress that way."

"Oh! It ain't nothin' when you get used to it, you know. I'm bobbin' around all over, and the petticoats I'd have to buy, through gittin' 'em tore, would bankrupt me. So you're Mrs. Hayes, are you?"

"I am."

"You look like sort of a first-class widder. S'pose you are a Christyun, eh?"

"No, not exactly that, although I always try to live a straightforward life."

"That's right. No one makes anything in the long run, by doin' bad. S'pose you never heard of me, before?"

Here was a poser. Hannah didn't want to say "no," outright because that would be a falsehood, and falsehoods were contrary to her conscientious scruples.

"Why—why, it seems to me I have heard some one mention your name, but I am sure I never saw or knew you."

"Oh! there's not a bit of doubt but what you're right on that score, Hanner—not a bit. I haven't bloomed around this hyer camp, only a few days. I am a detective!"

Hannah put up her hands, with a well-assumed look of horror.

"Mercy on me! a what?"

"A detective, ma'am—a ferret—a sundowner of a sleuth, an' I make it my biz to run crooked people into the jug."

"But—but—I am not bad! I am not crooked!"

"Dunno 'bout that. But, sit down. I'm in no special hurry."

Hannah first placed a tea-pot on the stove.

"Well, well!" she said, "so you're a detective, eh? How strange! As soon's the tea warms, we will have a cup of tea together, and you must tell me all about yourself. But, surely, you haven't anything against me? I have never committed any crime?"

"Maybe not. But, you see, I have found out that you have a child in your possession, which is not your own."

"You mean little Bertie?"

"Yes."

"So I have, and he has been lucky to have so kind a friend as I, if I do say it. I just worship him. And Mr. Sheldon pays me well for keeping him."

"He does, eh?"

"Yes, indeed! Oh! I hope you have not come to take him away from me?"

"That's precisely what I have come to do. The child has a father living, and must be restored to him."

"Oh! dear! oh! dear! What shall I do? How can I ever get along without him? Oh! miss, you won't take him away, to-night? You will let me keep him with me, until morning? Oh! please say you will!" and Hannah burst into tears—genuine ones, too, for she really did love little Bertie, and the thought of giving him up pained her, exceedingly.

Santa Fe Sal saw that her grief was genuine, and so she answered:

"Oh! well, Mrs. Hayes, I don't suppose the matter of a few short hours will make any particular difference, if you promise me I can have the child, when I call in the morning."

"To be sure I will promise, and I am so thankful to you, for not taking him away, to-night. When you call in the morning, I will be more ready to part with the dear little soul."

"Very well. You act like an honest person, and so I will grant your request. I must have a look at the child, to-night, however."

"Certainly. Step this way, please."

Hannah took the lamp, and led the way into the bedroom, and she allowed Santa Fe Sal to gaze down upon the little boy, who was sleeping sweetly in his cradle. After the girl detective had satisfied her curiosity, the two women went back to the main room again.

"Now, you must have a cup of tea with me, before you go," Hannah said. "Tea is a great thing for the nerves, I think. Do you take sugar in it, miss?"

"No. When I drink tea, which isn't very often, I always take it straight."

Hannah bustled about, and got down a couple of cups from a shelf, and poured out the tea, the odor of which filled the room.

She then gave one cupful to Santa Fe Sal, and kept the other, herself, and they became seated, across the table from each other.

"I suppose you don't know whose child your young *protegee* is?" Sal observed, as she stirred her beverage to cool it sufficiently so she could drink it.

"No, I do not," Hannah truthfully replied. "And I guess no one else does, except it be yourself."

"There's where you are mistaken. George Sheldon, who has been providing for the little fellow's support, is—"

Here Santa Fe Sal raised her cup of tea to her lips, and took several swallows.

"That's splendid tea," she said, as she set

the cup down on the table. "Will you get me a match?"

"What do you want of a match?"

"I want to smoke," and she took a cigar from her pocket, and bit the end off of it.

Hannah arose, and went into the adjoining room, her face so pale, that she was afraid the girl detective would notice it.

She did not return to the main room, for several minutes, but stood in the darkness, trembling with apprehension.

"My God! I hope I have not killed her!" she gasped. "I am almost afraid to venture out there again. Oh! why *did* I ever enter into the villainous compact with George Sheldon?"

She waited a couple of minutes longer, listening intently, but could not hear the slightest sound, in the next room.

Finally, summoning up courage, born of desperation, she entered.

A scream of horror immediately afterward burst from her lips, and it was little wonder that there did, considering her guilty nervousness.

Standing erect, but partly supported by one hand resting on the table, was Santa Fe Sal.

Her face was deathly white, and her eyes fairly protruded from their sockets, as they rested upon Hannah Hayes, with a wild, awful glare.

"Ha! you have poisoned me!" Sal gasped, her breath coming hard and spasmodically—"you have—ah—drugged—me—"

She reeled, before she could utter another sentence, and went crashing to the floor, where, after a few slight struggles, she lay as still as though dead.

Hannah stood gazing at her, transfixed with horror, until—

There came a loud rap on the door, that aroused her, and she heard the unmistakable voice of George Sheldon cry out:

"Quick! let me in. It is me—Sheldon!"

She staggered forward and unbarred the door, and the mine-owner entered.

A demoniac chuckle broke from his lips, as he saw the girl-detective lying before him, white and senseless.

"Ha! ha! You've done your work nobly, Hannah!" he cried. "I heard her fall, and knew what it signified!"

"Oh! I am afraid she is dead!" Hannah replied, wringing her hands in anguish.

"Nonsense. She's all right, but the devil's to pay, in another direction!"

"Oh! mercy—what is the matter?"

"Matter enough. Pete Painter and two-thirds of the camp are up at my cabin clamoring for admission. There's not a minute to be wasted, or we are both lost. You must take the boy and fly. At the lower end of camp, you will find a horse. Mount it and ride for your life. Do not stop, until you are miles from here; then keep on, till you reach Prescott. Wait for me there. Here is a thousand dollars. Ask no questions, but do as I bid you. Your very soul depends on it!"

He thrust a roll of notes into her hands, and pushed her away; then he hastily raised Santa Fe Sal, in his arms, and bounded from the cabin.

Wild with alarm, Hannah hastily thrust the money into her pocket, and put on her shawl and bonnet.

Then, she darted into the bedroom, and snatched up little Bertie, and bundled a blanket around him.

Hastening from the room, she left the cabin, and ran toward the point where Sheldon had said she would find a horse.

Up in the direction of Sheldon's cabin, there were wild and vengeful yells.

On ran Hannah.

She reached the point where a horse was standing.

She essayed to gain a seat in the saddle, but a strong hand caught hold of her shoulder, and a stern, authoritative voice said:

"Hold up, madam! I'll take charge of that child, if you've no objections!"

CHAPTER XVII.

CONCLUSION.

THE scene of our story changes once more to the cave in the mountain-side, whither George Sheldon took Adele, after abducting her from the Jackpot Saloon.

It is nearly twenty-four hours since the occurrences narrated in the preceding chapter.

A bright fire burns within the cave, illuminating every part of it.

Seated beside each other at one side of the cave, bound hand and foot, are two persons.

One is Adele; the other, Santa Fe Sal.

Both are now awake, but very pale from the effects of the powerful drug they have only recently slept off.

At the fire, engaged in roasting a piece of venison, the reader beholds Madame Samuels, the clairvoyant, who is acting as jaileress over the two captives.

"Do you think there is any doubt but what George Sheldon will return?" Santa Fe Sal demanded.

"None whatever," the madame replied, "unless the mob should get hold of him, and he will take good care they don't, you bet!"

"The mob?"

"Yes. Nearly all Buckshot is up in arms against him for killing Old Jackpot and stealing Adele. Oh, he will be back, sure enough. I've got his plans all down pat, you see."

"What are they?"

"Well, when he comes, about the first thing he intends to do is to smother you, and thus prevent you ever after from following him. Then he will also kill Adele, if she still refuses to marry him, and after that he will take his money, which I have found to be secreted under yonder stone, and leave for parts unknown. That is—*maybe*!"

"And you will permit him to escape?"

The madame laughed dryly.

"Wait and see!" she said. "Didn't I tell you I have got everything arranged for a grand finale! You never knew me to lie, I guess."

Just then heavy footsteps were heard, and George Sheldon entered the cave.

His face and eyes wore expressions of baffled rage, and his manner was extremely nervous.

Without a word to the madame, he advanced toward Santa Fe Sal, a devilish gleam in his eyes.

"So at last I have found you out!" he hissed, shaking his clinched fist at her. "You lied to me! You said you came to Buckshot alone, you she fiend!"

"Ah! *did* I?"

"Yes, you did, curses on you!"

"And what makes you think I didn't?"

"I *know* you didn't. You came here on the lead of a party, and as the chief detective in the employ of my deadliest foe, Robert Sheldon! You came here to secure me on the charge of murder!"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure!"

"What makes you so sure? Any one is liable to be mistaken once in a while, you know!"

"Bah! I make no mistakes. Robert Sheldon and the fellow Don Juan Carlos are both up at the camp, and my son has explained who he is and what his grievances are, and the whole camp has extended him a hearty welcome, and have volunteered to assist in the search for me. But they shall never take me alive—oh, no! They will find me smart enough to outwit them yet!"

As he spoke he drew from his hip-pocket a keen-edged knife, and examined it with a diabolical chuckle.

"No! they shall not outwit me!" he cried. "Nor shall you live to gloat over the result of your detective work, young woman. To you I am indebted for bringing those hell-hounds after me; to you I am indebted that my crimes ever became exposed—so here and now you shall die for your pains. When you came nosing after me you struck the scent of the wrong man. You reckoned without your host, in the fullest sense of the word. And now, as you die, so perish all meddlers who call themselves detectives!"

He grasped the gleaming weapon firmly in his right hand, and took a step forward, murder gleaming from his flashing eyes; but a hand clutched him by the shoulder and hurled him back, and he found himself confronted by Madame Samuels, in whose grasp was a cocked six-shooter, leveled full at the mine-owner.

"Stand!" she cried, in ringing tones. "Dare to move a muscle, and I'll put the contents of this weapon through your vile carcass!"

At the same instant both Santa Fe Sal and Adele arose to their feet, the ropes that had apparently bound them falling to the floor.

"Yes, George Sheldon!" Sal cried, "your game is up, and your cards worn out. You have played strong and cute, but the strongest players eventually lose. You are my prisoner!"

George Sheldon had turned deathly white, and the knife fell from his nerveless grasp to the floor.

"*Traitress!*" he hissed, glaring at Madame Samuels, "who are you?"

"Who am I?" echoed the madame, with a laugh; "why, I am Alvin Green, of the detec-

tive firm of Santa Fe Sal & Green, at your service!"

And, sure enough, as the veil was removed, the sharp, smoothly-shaven face of Alvin Green was exposed to view.

Sheldon uttered a torrent of oaths, and cast a glance toward the cave entrance.

"You dare?" Alvin Green reminded, in a stern voice. "I'll riddle you if you try it."

"Give me your hands!" Santa Fe Sal ordered, producing a pair of handcuffs. "There's nothing for you to do but surrender, and save yourself the pain of being shot!"

She had no difficulty in handcuffing him, and then ordered him to go and sit down in one corner of the cave, which he did.

All his spirit seemed crushed, and he was weak and nerveless.

Alvin Green proceeded to divest himself of his padded female attire, underneath which was his proper clothing.

He and Santa Fe Sal then held a low conversation together, after which Green left the cave.

Santa Fe Sal waited some twenty minutes; then she drew a revolver, and ordered Sheldon to rise.

He seemed to infer that some important event was about to take place, for he became seized with a fit of trembling as he arose.

"My God! where are you going to take me? What are you going to do with me?" he gasped, in piteous tones.

"I am going to take you before the man you so terribly wronged!" Santa Fe Sal replied. "I am going to take you to your son, Robert Sheldon, and place you at his mercy!"

"Oh! for the love of God do not do that. He will kill me. Oh! have mercy on me, child—I beg of you have mercy. You shall have all of my worldly possessions if you will but permit me to escape."

"Nary an escape, me daisy! You've got to come to Limerick, this time, and take your rations same as other ruffians do. Right about face—march! Make an attempt to run, and I'll give ye a pain in the back. Come along, Miss Adele!"

In single file they left the cave and marched away toward the mining-camp, where a brilliant reflection against the sky showed that large bonfires had been built.

As they entered the camp and neared the Jackpot Saloon, they passed between two lines of men, drawn up in grim array, each man equipped with a cocked revolver in hand.

They came to a halt just in front of the Jackpot, and as they did so the voice of Pete Painter sung out:

"Hurrah, boys—hip! hip! hurrah for Santa Fe Sal, the Slasher!"

Instantaneously a mighty shout rent the air in response to Painter's request.

The girl detective then wheeled George Sheldon about, facing a knoll just opposite the Jackpot Saloon.

Upon this knoll, firmly erect, with folded arms and uncovered head, stood Robert Sheldon.

His face was slightly pale, but every feature was composed and stern in expression.

Beside him, on the ground, sat the little waif, Bertie, in the charge of Don Juan Carlos.

The face of George Sheldon was ghastly in its pallor, as he faced the son, whom he had so fearfully wronged.

"George Sheldon!"

It was the son's voice that rung out clear and stern.

The mine-owner trembled, and his gaze dropped to the ground in front of him.

"George Sheldon," the son repeated, "do you know me?"

A nod of the head was the only reply.

"Who am I?"

"Robert Sheldon!" was the almost-inaudible answer.

"Yes, I am Robert Sheldon, and you, I am sorry to say, are my own father. Gentlemen," to the crowd, "most of you have heard my story, but for the benefit of those who have not, I will once more briefly narrate it.

"A few years ago my father and I were in the commission and brokerage business in Chicago, and were doing so well that we considered ourselves getting rich. I married a young lady of wealth, and everything went well for a time.

"Gradually I grew to believe that my father was jealous of my business talents, for I made more money than he did by private speculations, into which he was too dull to enter. I never suspected, however, that he was a villain, until I was arrested for forgery, and he testified against me, and was instrumental in sending me to prison for ten years.

"After I was sent to Joliet, my father induced my wife to marry him, he having procured a bogus divorce, and they went away together, taking with them not only my wife's fortune, but all the money my father could raise.

"They came West. My father soon tired of my misguided and wretched wife and deserted her, stealing all her money, and leaving her and the child to starve among strangers.

"Less than a month after they left Chicago, I was pardoned from prison, it having been discovered that my father, not I, was the author of the forgery.

"I then took the trail of vengeance, and never have left it, since. I swore to have revenge, and recover my child, and I lived for nothing else.

"I chased the guilty couple, until I found out about the desertion. Then, I lost all track of them, but understood that Florence—she that was my wife—had gone in pursuit of George Sheldon, for the purpose of killing him.

"I never gained a clew of their whereabouts, until I employed Santa Fe Sal and Alvin Green. They have figured the whole case out. I have got my long-lost child, and before me stands the wretch who ruined my home, and murdered my wife. George Sheldon, what have you to say for yourself?"

"Nothing!" was the reply.

"Do you deny your guilt?"

"No."

"Then, what do you expect—mercy?"

There was no reply.

The mine-owner's gaze was fixed upon the ground, in a stony stare.

"You need expect no mercy!" Robert Sheldon went on, "for you are a doomed man. It has been my intention to fight you, and kill you, but I have changed my mind. You must die by one of two methods. You see yonder a noosed rope, suspended from the limb of a tree. Underneath is a box. By standing on the box, you can put your neck through the noose, draw it taut, and jump off the box, into eternity. You will thus have the satisfaction of being your own executioner; or, if you do not like this method, say so, and you will be tied to a tree, and a committee of ten men will draw lots to see which one shall take a Winchester rifle, and put two bullets through your heart—one bullet for each murder you have committed. Take your choice, remembering you have only five minutes to live, in either case!"

"My God! Have mercy, my son, have mercy!"

"Silence! Speak not to me of mercy! Decide, and act upon your decision!" was the cold reply.

With a shudder, the wretch glanced at the dangling noose a few yards distant, and then at the array of grim faces on either hand.

Not a face expressed sympathy for him.

A deep groan escaped him, and he walked unsteadily over to the knoll, and dropped upon his knees in front of his grandchild.

Thus he remained, with bowed head, for a moment, as if in prayer; then he kissed the child, and arose.

With a firm step he walked forward to meet his doom.

He reached the box, and was assisted to get upon it.

Without hesitation, he thrust his head through the noose, and by bearing down, drew it tight around his neck.

Then standing erect, he said:

"I have no regrets, except that I cannot live to warn all men against the curse of sin. Adieu!"

Then—

But, let us draw the curtain!

Little needs to be said in conclusion.

Not many days after the closing tragedy, Don Juan Carlos and Adele, otherwise Mabel McDonald, started for Mexico, where the latter subsequently came into possession of her fortune and was married to the Don.

The services of Cap Clymer's men, who had been brought to the vicinity of the town, were not needed, and they went back to their secret mine, of which we may some time write.

It was Don Juan who had rescued little Bertie from Hannah Hayes, and then warned her to leave the country under penalty of death.

Rowdy Jack was released, and left for parts unknown, no doubt glad to escape with his life.

Robert Sheldon did not tarry long in Buckshot, for, though the citizens avowed him to be his father's heir, he refused even to enter the mine, and returned East.

And Santa Fe Sal (otherwise Sara Wilmot), came with him, and became his wife.

While, at frequent intervals, roaming from place to place in the Far West, may be encountered an odd-looking specimen of humanity, calling himself Alvin Green, who totes around a hand-organ, and who is accompanied by a monkey.

THE END.

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